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Sid Dex:

Once a Classic, Always a Classic

By Anthony P. Russo

Art by Charles Lang

1949. Like it never was. A framed certificate was the office wall's sole decoration. A man, a well-dressed if squat fellow, tentatively passed through the open door, dodging open boxes, crates, and mismatched furniture pieces just to locate the middle of the dusty room. "Hello?" he called.

My first place was located on 612 Main Street in Old Town. Nice little building. The landlady, Mrs. Phillips, was a kindly old spinster who used to sit quietly in her rocker with a shotgun across her lap. She said she needed the shotgun to remind tenants that our lives on this little world were short enough, so don't go hastening things by delaying the rent payment. Needless to say, I always paid Mrs. P on time. The apartment side of the office was one of those "deluxe convenience" jobs. Deluxe convenience here meant the kitchen wasn't in your living room and it took five minutes to get hot water instead of ten. Great place, loved it until I had to find a new one. Which is another tale.

"Hello yourself," a tall steamer trunk, covered with the colorful stamps of various ports and interstellar destinations, replied. The visitor appeared genuinely relieved when a living person stepped out from behind it.

"What can I do you for?" the man asked nonsensically, but in such a straight-faced manner that it almost sounded correct.

The visitor began to beat a hasty retreat out the way he entered. "I'm terribly sorry, I must have the wrong place. I was looking for a Mr. Sidney Dexter."

The man offered a hand. "Sidney M. Dexter. Sid Dex, if you're short of breath. At your service. Who the hell are you?"

"You are in need of clients? Or are you one of those self-sustaining investigators who gets by on good looks and snappy dialogue?" Dexter laughed quietly. The rest of Sid Dex was a wiry, lean form like that of a boxer. He was not tall, not broad or clumsy like some over-sized athletic machine. His eyes never ceased moving, constantly assessing the information they gathered. His facial expressions changed as rapidly as his moods, which could swing from hysterical sarcasm to blue somber at any given moment, or drop completely like the mask of a Kabuki artist.

"You've been watching too many radiopix shows. So who are you, honestly now?" The tiny man bowed slightly as he spoke.

"I am Vincente Raphael, manservant and personal attendant to His Lordship, the Duke Lionel Pettingworth. At your service." Dexter had an uncontrollable urge to return the bow. The man's accent hinted at Euro overtones, but his commanding method of speech would have made Dexter's old grammar teacher swoon.

Dexter began to hastily pick up errant papers and clothing. "Sorry about the mess, I had no idea I'd be meeting royalty today, I just signed the lease this morning ..."

Raphael raised a hand. "Do not bother. His Lordship the Duke passed away some two weeks ago. I am quite alone."

"Sorry to hear that. My condolences." Dexter quickly swept a chair clean of last week's laundry and offered it to the manservant. Raphael removed some sort of chromed box from a pocket and passed it over the chair, humming absently while Dexter watched silently. As quickly as he began, the man stopped and straightened, as if realizing his actions. He smiled wanly as he switched the buzzing device off.

"Dirt repulsor. I've done it so many times for his lordship, I forget sometimes that ..." He frowned and sank in the chair, the repulsor still clenched tightly in his hands, black bowler on his lap, unable to speak. Dexter took the opposite desk chair, a creaky old swivel-style, nodding.

"It's rough, suddenly being out of a job," he offered. "So how long did you butler for his lordship?" That produced a tiny smile on Raphael's face. Dexter liked to think he could empathize with almost any working-class Joe, even a duke's servant.

"A butler is a servant of the house. An attendant, a valet like myself, deals with the, say ... personal matters of his master. I was in the employ of Duke Lionel for nearly twenty-eight years. But I do thank you for being sympathetic to my situation. The past few weeks have not been a pleasant experience."

"A fellow is where he hangs his gun, so they say." Dexter pulled a holstered Colt autopistol out from a desk drawer, his hands checking various switches out of habit. "Mr. Raphael, what do you want? If you're looking for work, well, I don't need any personal valet. Now if you had a small bomb to clear out this office, maybe, but I'm not hiring nowadays. Few folks are — times are tough everywhere in the city."

"You are most polite, but I am not engaging employment, Mr. Dexter. I happen to be looking for a key."

And with that, the dapper manservant began his story.

That key turned out not to be as cryptic as you might think. It just happened to belong to his late Duke's 1929 Rolls-Royce Silver Phaeton. As the little guy explained, the Duke had planned to vacation in America for a spell and had his prize Rolls shipped over so he could motor about, as the Brits might say. But the Duke died the



very night his bullet train rolled out of the Transcontinental Tunnel and into Chicago. The Rolls had been shipped here by mass-lifter via British Skytrain, and was locked up tight in Chicago customs.

That would have ended the story right there, if it had not been for the reading of the Duke's will. Whatever Vincent Raphael, Personal Valet, was entitled to (strangely, the will does not exactly get into any specifics) is locked inside ... you guessed it ... the Rolls — with the key nowhere to be found. I had always thought these loony royal types only appeared in Agatha Christie novels, the results of unnatural inbreeding. Of course, there were no spare keys to this Rolls. Raphael had searched all of his lordship's possessions and his own. After talking awhile, it became pretty obvious to me that the manservant had been banking on whatever the Duke had left to him. He looked kind of down and out for the fight.

"Any chance he left the key at home? With somebody?" Dexter spoke up after Raphael had exhausted his Valet's Tale, offering him a paper cone of water from the outside hallway cooler.

Raphael shook his head. "There was only the one key. He kept it on a special gold watch chain given to him by his daughter, Celia. I have never seen him remove the watch chain, even when dressed in his bedclothes. When he bathed, he kept it in a tiny chest by his tub. He just absolutely adored that car. He never let a soul, including myself, drive it. And like that key, the car went with us wherever we went. Three months ago, we traveled to Egypt. The year before that — lower Africa. I recall one particular humorless immigration official in India claiming that the car had more travel stamps on its registration than our own passports."

"Peculiar man." Dexter began rapping his fingers on the desk. "You mentioned a daughter. Where's she?"

"Miss Celia Pettingworth is staying at the Hotel Essex, trying to release my lordship's possessions from your rather notorious Chicago customs office. They are not kind when it comes to someone passing away and leaving their things with them." Raphael finally mustered up the courage to look at Dexter directly. "Can you help me, sir?"

Dexter frowned, realizing he had to come to a decision. He sighed, stood up, and began to walk around what tiny floor space was not currently occupied. Outside the office window was an ample view of Old Town Chicago, its brownstones and cake-layer offices arranged like dominos. Occasionally a starfreighter or scow bound for the Docks passed overhead, pale blue and rust-colored hulls against a patchwork sea of clouds. "I don't know. I don't like to snowball people and get their hopes up."

"How refreshingly honest. Then is it possible to estimate how much you would charge for such a contract? I'm afraid what remains of my savings may not be enough to foot this foolish pursuit. Duke Lionel paid well, but I have a wife and several relatives to support. It would seem to be the Furies' wish to have me continuously suffer."

Dexter began rubbing at the growing shadow on his chin. "Well, what do you think I should charge? I mean, if you were me?"

The valet's expression turned quizzical. "You don't know?" Dexter spread his palms and shrugged, not liking to admit it.

"See that framed thing all nice and square on the wall?" The manservant looked at the certificate and nodded. "It's

exactly three days old. That ad you probably saw in the Tribune is even younger. You're my very first case, Mister Raphael. Congratulations. If I had a cigar, I'd offer one to you."

"That's not very heartening." Raphael appeared as if the very Furies would come to strike him at any given moment.

"Relax. I'm not exactly new to this. I was an intelligence officer for my Uncle Sammy during the Great War — Part Two. After the atom blasts, I came back home here with a thousand bucks in my G.I. pocket and no job. I tried being a cop for a few years, until I couldn't stomach Chicago blue any more. So I here I am. It beats waiting tables. Now on to your problem. If I remember my days at the courts correctly, the lawyers used to charge a client a percentage if they won or lost the case. I tell you what, I'll give this missing key bit my best shot. If I manage to find it and whatever's in the Rolls is worth something, you give me say ... twenty percent of the value. If I don't find the key for the car, or whatever's inside is so much bird seed, then I get nothing. Fair?"

Raphael almost stuttered. "Yes, well, but isn't that unfair to you? Not to concede a bargain, even considering your experience, or certain lack of, but what if it does turn out to be worth absolutely nothing?"

Dexter grinned his best, a toothy smile that was perhaps destined to become world-famous or notorious, depending on one's view. He leaned comfortably back in the old swivel chair, surrounded by his cardboard mountains of dusty boxes and used furniture.

"That's not what I'm banking on."

Not long after the manservant of the late Duke Pettingworth had set foot inside his new office, Sid Dexter was on the monorail, a gleaming solitary track aimed straight for the heart of New Town Chicago, Colt pistol all snug and warm in its side holster as the magnet-lift train whispered along.

I had grilled the servant until both our throats ran dry. He was still shaking his head about our deal when he left, but I figured it had to be a sure thing. I may be new to this game, but twenty-seven-plus years of faithful service to a rich old Duke had to be worth something, and all for a key. It depended on the daughter — either she was totally and completely naïve about the dilemma, in which case all I was out was train fare, or she was being greedy as hell and stooging the valet for a loop. Or maybe it was someone else after all. I was only guessing. But a few years on the Chicago Police beat taught me a few things you can't learn from correspondence-school books, and one of them is people. That's why I carry the gun.

Besides, it was nice to take the m-rail again, just to watch the view as we shot across the brownstone boundary into New Town. Beat cops rarely get to take trains. New Town Chicago was built around the '39 World's Fair, that highly-optimistic exposition of the perfect future — before reality, and WW II, spoiled all the fun. The city had big plans for the Fair and the surrounding area, even commissioning General Motors to build the monorail, in high hopes that all those workers and tourists who lived in the new post-war suburbs would come and spend their post-war bucks in New Town. It never happened. Nowadays,

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Penguin USA

Rumbling Earth

By Gregory Benford
Art by Cortney Skinner

1.
1988

Squinting against the slicing sunlight, Dwight Raser shouted, "Lift!"

The excavation crew leaned heavily on crowbars. The heavy-duty winch roared, chains clinked and tightened, dust stirred in the desert breeze — and nothing happened. The crew was already tired from a half day of laborious picking away at the dinosaur vertebrae. They grunted and thrust down harder to free the enormous chunk of pale, sandy fossil.

"Careful!" Mito could not help herself crying out. She reached over and touched Dwight's arm, alarm widening her eyes.

Dwight glanced at her, seeming to be more surprised at this touch from a woman who was normally reserved, compact. "That sucker's heavy, but don't you worry. We'll get it —"

Something broke free at the base of the vertebrae and the winch growled louder. It was mounted on the back of a grimy flatbed truck. Mito watched the big black tires flash as they took the weight.

Dwight had estimated over three thousand pounds. Why did Americans persist in that antiquated system of units? Mito watched the mass lift with excruciating slowness and translated into kilos. A thousand! How could the winch —

It couldn't. A thick steel-blue bar supporting the chains bent abruptly. The crew scattered — except for one young woman, who held onto her crowbar.

Something snapped. The stony vertebrae lurched, dropped. The woman screamed.

Dust settled as she lay sprawled.

The next few minutes were a fevered blur. Shouts. Attempts to free the woman's leg from under the mass. Recriminations. Angry denials. Sweaty tugs at the crowbars.

Dwight said nothing, just walked around the tilted chunk that had come down to them out of a hundred and fifty million years of pressing silence, and thought. Mito watched him closely, and not merely to distract herself from the contorted face of the woman.

Three young men began digging at the hard-packed soil around her calf, but Dwight stopped them. Instead he told the crew to realign the chains. An angle here, oblique tension there, forces vectoring away from the crushed leg — Mito gained fresh respect for the man's quick competence. She was more at home in cool laboratories and had always felt awe for the rough-and-ready elements in science, the rub of the real.

As the crew got ready their faces were drawn, eyes hollow. If the chunk of massive vertebrae slipped again, it could roll.

The woman lay staring blankly up into the piercing winter sun, shock numbing her. She mumbled incoherent-

ly. Mito wondered if it was a prayer.

The crew set themselves, digging in. Mito could see wary flickers in their faces as they calculated where they would flee if something went wrong. Following Dwight's gesture, Mito took hold of one of the woman's shoulders and set her feet to pull. Two men also held the woman. They all looked at each other, nodded, said nothing.

"Lift!" Dwight called again.

This time the massive bulk tilted, escorted by crowbars. The grinding labor of the winch swallowed a chorus of grunts.

The sandy chunk rose a centimeter, two, three — Mito pulled. The woman slid free. They dragged her several meters away and she began yelling with pain.

After a jeep had taken the woman away for a long, jouncing journey into San Ysidro, she stood with Dwight and watched the crew beef up the hoist assembly. Nobody suggested knocking off for the day.

"Damn stupid, that," Dwight said. "Some kinda introduction for you, eh?"

"You said yourself that it is not easy to estimate the weight of such segments," Mito said.

"Well, I screwed that one up pretty bad." He scuffed at the dust. "This baby's sure bigger than that 'ultrasaurus' Jim Jensen's been talking about. He found a spine of one a few years ago. They didn't get anybody hurt, though."

The skeleton was mostly uncovered now. The deep trench curved along the brow of a worn sandstone bluff. Dwight's terse report had said it was 140 feet long, bigger than *Diplodocus*, bigger even than the largest of the plant-eaters, *Brachiosaurus*.

Mito said, "A set of vertebrae so massive can easily —"

"Two-inch cold rolled steel, too, just gave way."

"Do not blame yourself. That woman was slow." Her voice must have given away the depth of her feeling, for Dwight turned and looked at her with surprise, something fresh coming into his face.

"Thanks for sayin' so," he said quietly. "But it's my fault."

She saw then that beneath the gruff manner he was tired and sad and yet undaunted. "My dad, he used to say being fast on your feet was one talent nobody could teach you. Maybe so."

A moment passed between them which she was to remember to the end. A crinkling of his eyes, a wryly sour smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Brooding, assessing blue eyes. She breathed shallowly, as if to not disturb the currents that brushed between them. She had found Americans confusing, but this man held a kind of limpid mystery.

She had always been drawn to puzzles, and a man like this was doubly odd. A Westerner in both senses of the word, cowboy/scientist, walnut-brown from years of scour-



ing the rocky wastes, yet also known for his precise, meticulous excavations of great fossils.

He had made this remarkable find by dragging an 8-gauge shotgun through these ranges on a wheeled cart. It fired a slug of soft metal into the ground. The slug flattened and sent out a pulse of sound waves. An array of microphones lowered down a drilled hole picked up the waves. A computer unfurled their signals into a three-dimensional picture of the sandstone beneath. Sound sped through bone faster than through stone, and the difference in arrival time cast a sharp sound-shadow. Oak Ridge had developed the shotgun technique to find old sites where drums of radioactive waste had been buried. Dinosaur bones were about the same size, and paleontologists had seized upon this happy accident to extend their grasp.

"This sucker's gotta be ten EEU's, easy," he said.

"Uh... EEU?"

"Oh, sorry. Field jargon. Equivalent Elephant Units, a little joke. Elephants weigh about seven and a half tons. This guy's gotta be ten EEU's — that's twice the mass of a brontosaurus."

"What will you name it?"

"Well..." He seemed a bit embarrassed. "I figure the ground shook when it came by. How 'bout *Seismosaurus*?"

She allowed herself an amused smile. Her hair was pulled back in a severe black bun held with a blue clasp, and she wore a tan field jumper. Dealing with men in such delicate professional matters had never been her strong point, and it was best to not give any unwanted signals.

He led her to the tail dig. They climbed down through nearly three meters of sandstone into the cool trench. The beast had apparently died beside a river and had been quickly buried by drifting sand, she remembered from his report. That kept predators from rending and scattering the bones.

This was a wonderful discovery site, deep inside a federal wilderness area, easy to hide and defend from tourist-vandals. Dirt bikers didn't like the rippling rock formations. This was an upthrust of the Morrison Formation which stretched across the American West. It held the great herbivores, a massive sheet of rock entombing the classic era of giants. They had found 'possum fossils here within the first few days of scraping, mere minor newcomers on the scale of deep time.

She sneezed from the dust and knelt to follow his description. He had launched into lecture mode, probably to put her at ease, letting her lapse back into her usual air of quiet formality.

"These're Late Jurassic rocks, laid down in a river channel that sliced into older red shale. It's fine-grained sandstone and gray shales with lacings of reddish brown and tan-yellow. Material was mostly unconsolidated, which accounts for the undisturbed fossil."

It was a beautiful job, stripping away the rock at an inch a day to reveal the smoothly curving, colossal spine.

"These projections, big fat chevrons, see? I figure they helped adjust the weight. Beast like this, carryin' the load's a big problem."

"Thus the hollow bones," she said.

"Huh? How'd you know that?" A sudden scowl.

"Do not patronize me, my colleague." She enjoyed the connotation that flitted across his face.

"Okay, let's cut the socializing. I hoped you Los Alamos

types could tell me what I've got here."

"Indeed, I can." Her visiting two-year appointment under the US-Japan exchange program gave her freedom to pursue eccentric ideas. On impulse she had volunteered for Dr. Raser's curiously worded request. He had refused to give away any information about the fossil material he had brought to the Laboratory — including the fact that some of it was not fossil at all.

She had prepared her conclusions for a more formal presentation, but somehow, standing here in a shaded trench amid the hammer and clang of the continuing work, sweaty even in the winter sun, skin plated with tanga dust — it all felt sharper, pungent, more earthily real than her antiseptic life amid Pyrex precisions.

"I respect your intentions," she said, wishing her tone was not naturally so stiff; a liability of her strict Japanese upbringing, perhaps. "Still, I would have appreciated knowing exactly what I was given to analyze."

He chuckled. "I wanted straight scoop, no preconceptions."

"I knew the scrapings had to be old, of course. Very old."

"How?" His bristly eyebrows knitted together with suspicion. "Somebody leak it?"

"I ran isotope tests. There is a high concentration of uranium."

"Um. Guess it maybe could've concentrated in the bones..."

"Not 'maybe' — it did. Scintillation counters do not lie."

"Uh huh." Noncommittal, eyes giving nothing away.

"You gave me some standard fossil material, yes?"

He grinned. "Sure. Know which ones?"

"Samples 3, 7, and 11 through 16."

"Bingo." His grin broadened.

"The signatures were clear. Silica, pyrite, calcite — they had intruded into the bone, replacing the organic matter."

"Standard fossil process, right. I took those samples from the outer segments of the sacrum, pelvis, ribs."

"And the others?"

He smiled slyly. "Not so fast. What'd you find?"

"Very well. Collagen."

She could have laughed at the blank expression on his face. "What's that?" he asked.

"A protein."

"Um." He peered up at the rectangle of blank blue sky, then gave her a guarded look. "What else?"

"No, it is your turn. I suspect you merely gave me fossil samples which had been contaminated — correct?"

"Huh? Contaminated how?"

"By your assistants' handling. Flocks of skin. Human dander."

He shook his head strongly. "Nossir. We took pelvis bones, femur, some spine. Real careful."

"Hollow bones, all?"

"Right. Drilled 'em in vacuum. You got the samples straight from the vac box, believe me."

She felt a strange prickly sensation rush across her skin. A chilly breeze? Here? "How... how did you pick the sites for drilling?"

"Most of this fossil was formed by the usual process. Organic molecules were leached out by ground water, then the interstices filled — with quartz, mostly. But the biggest dinosaurs evolved hollow bones to help 'em keep their weight down." He gave her a look of respect. "You



KANSAS SAUROPOD PARK



KANSAS
SAUROPOD PARK

looked that up, right?"

"Of course. I became suspicious."

"Look, I'll come clean. It looked to me like the quartz intrusions had sealed up the pores and connections in some of the bones. There was stuff inside — hard but lighter."

"Those were the other samples."

"Right. I figured maybe the solids had trapped some bone in there, preserving it. Real bone, not stuff replaced by minerals. The bones didn't crack, see, so the inside might still be chemically intact. Hell, maybe there's even marrow."

His face had a pensive, almost shy quality. His eyes seemed to plead with her. She had enjoyed playing this game with him, but now there was a tingling in her, a shortness of breath, and she could constrain it no longer.

"I found collagen, yes. Then I performed a thirty-element analysis. Twenty-eight of the elemental abundances matched modern bone to within five percent."

"Ah. Close."

"Very."

His mouth twisted in sudden speculation. "So if bone hasn't evolved a whole lot since the Jurassic..."

"There is more. I found twelve other proteins. Clear signatures."

He blinked. His mouth made an O of surprise, then closed.

In the long silence that hung between them she heard, as though coming hollowly down a distant tunnel, the clatter and muted mutterings of the restless human energies around them, delving deeply and with patient persistence, seeking.

"You thinking what I am?" he asked, eyes glinting.

"I believe so. The protein will be broken, of course, by thermal damage."

She was surprised at her voice, still restrained and professional and not giving away a hint of the quickening in her body, of her attraction to this man mingled with the suddenly apparent idea he had begun. He must be thinking along the same lines, or he would not have asked for so specific a series of tests.

The air held a savor of tingling possibility.

"We'll want to be careful."

"Indeed."

"People'll say it's sensationalistic."

"I expect so."

"But we don't want to get scooped, right? Got to be fast on our feet, like my dad said."

She stepped nearer him and caught a heady scent, a sweaty musk that hung in the dry air. Looking up at him, she knew exactly what he was thinking behind his shy smile. His head blotted out the sun. She said quietly, "We can try."

2.

2050

Sixty-two years, she thought. Sixty-two years of trying, of steadily carrying forward their dream. Did they guess then how far it could go? Mists shrouded the decades ... she couldn't remember.

"Dr. Nakawa?" a young man asked at her elbow. She recognized him: Flores, the microtech specialist. He had made some of the first DNA reconstructions which proved out. That had been a decade ago at least — yet his face

was still unlined. Molecular tinkering nowadays corrected many of nature's flaws.

"I was just resting." The pain had passed.

"Your husband is already out in the canyon. He said —"

"I know — hurry up." She made a fierce, comic frown. "He's been pacing around since dawn."

She let the man lead her through the hushed carpeting of the executive offices, past labs and workshops and big work bays. The place had a spruced-up sharpness, part of the half-century observance. She recognized some of the equipment, vastly better than the bulky stuff they had used decades ago to do the first detailed protein chain readings.

The sign over an impressive entrance said *Helical Library* — a bit of romantic dash, unusual for the bureaucracy-heavy Park Service. She reminded herself that after today she would take some time to browse in there. The flood of new data and ideas made research resemble trying to take a drink from a fire hose, but she was damned if she wouldn't try.

That had been the analogy she and Dwight first used in their grant proposals: the DNA library. For the *Seismosaurus* they had millions of copies of the same book — DNA segments — but each copy had only a page or two left in it. Worse, the pages weren't numbered. The blind rub of millennia had ripped out all but a few of the *Seismosaurus* genetic plans.

The trick lay in realizing that each fragment of DNA they found was a book with different pages left. Find enough books, compare the pages, stitch and splice and edit ... and they could eventually patch together a complete book.

As Dwight often said, after all the talk about molecular groups and amino acids, the library analogy *felt* right. Even a congressman could grasp it.

The young man opened a door — and the fragrance and noise and buzz of the crowd hit her. She blinked at the sudden sun glare. Here were familiar faces, grins, hands to shake, 3D cams doing zoom-shots. She made perfunctory greetings, smiled a lot. Then they fell away from her as the officials performed their best function, brushing people off. She walked a bit unsteadily through a stand of gum trees, shielding her eyes against the slanting morning light.

"Mito!" Dwight called. He was with a small group of technical people, all carrying field equipment and communicators. She waved and hurried to his side.

"It's almost here," he said. "Ready?"

Then the tech types were talking, checking, reassuring, and she never answered. They all fell silent.

Through the moist air they could hear now the snapping of small trees. A strange, hollow bellowing. And the steps. Long, heavy blows, like a boulder bounding endlessly down a mountainside. Regular, stolid, remorseless.

She had never quite become accustomed to the sight. It was more like a moving jade-green hill, not a living thing at all. Human intuitions of size failed in the face of the great muscle slabs, the smoothly sliding hummocks of fat.

But the hammer blows of its broad, clawed feet belied its grace. The bountiful tail held over eighty vertebrae, tapering to a long, slender whiplash. The beast did not drag such mass, though. The tail arced smoothly upward,

pert and buoyant. This weight balanced precisely the pipeline neck which swiveled with lazy grandeur, carrying the head aloft to browse among the tallest eucalyptus.

The improbability of the sight always struck her first. This most massive of land creatures moved with measured, easy elegance. A great deal of its brain dealt with balance and movement, because it did not need the sharpened senses and low cunning of the hunters.

They all stepped back involuntarily as it approached. A technician whispered to her, "Don't worry, ma'm, we've done this a thousand times. It'll stop right over there."

Of course, Mito thought, of course. But if everybody's so sure, why are they whispering?

She stepped back anyway, taking Dwight's arm.

The lumbering immensity halted exactly at the right spot. Then a crane lifted the two of them to the prepared chairs perched securely on the broad, leathery back. As all this happened it was as though Mito was two persons, one experiencing the heady swirl of smells and sounds, the other abstractly recalling the many hard struggles and failures they had seen through decades past.

From the proteins in its bone marrow, long before they knew its DNA, she and Dwight had shown that the Seismosaurus was a milk-maker. She turned and watched this mother's brood ambling along nearby, munching small saplings. They were a mere two meters high, tails pointed nearly straight up, perky and alert. One cooed for its mother. Mito knew that today the moving mountain under them would not pause to give suck, however. The

control relay rode like a silvery helmet atop the square head, giving carefully programmed orders.

The cheering from below fell away and behind them. Walking was a slow, grave rhythm. The young ones skipped ahead, calling to each other. They were moving appetites, stripping leaves and bark from the copse of gum trees. These babies grew quickly, evolution's best way to offset against predators, but there were none such here.

"You okay?" Dwight asked, concern deepening the furrows in his face.

"I am indulging in memories." She smiled at the passing broad expanse of the canyon as it opened toward the Kansas plain.

"Remember the first ones?"

She laughed. "I thought we would never get one to survive."

"It was you who saw what they needed."

"No, I merely carried it out."

"Nonsense. They had milk but no mothering. And you were the only one on the whole team who had the guts to mother something like a calf with claws."

She beamed. "All that would have amounted to nothing if you had not suggested feeding them stones."

He shrugged. "That didn't take guts."

Even the babies needed stomach stones to crush tough leaves and pine needles, a staple of their diet after the first month. In their antiseptic cages the babies had no way to find any pebbles. Such simple points had eluded the brainy genetic engineers.

A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1.50 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

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Brian Aldiss
Alan Dean Foster
Connie Willis
John Kessel
Kevin O'Donnell Jr.
D.C. Poyer

M. Lucie Chin
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Park Service HQ helicopters hissed overhead, but their directives, relayed through the silvery helmet, did not completely offset all natural impulses. Feeding had to be constant, automatic. The beaked jaw was so powerful it could bite into a fat redwood and mash it to pulp in a sawmill of blade-sharp teeth. To work the vast jaws and support the massive skull, thick slabs of muscle worked over an arc of bone back down the thick neck. The cheeks bunched and flowed, chewing perpetually below eyes protected by horned ridges. It fed quickly, not even breaking stride. Its life was a perpetual odyssey, browsing four hundred kilos of leaf and needle a day.

Dwight pointed. "River comin' up."

Her composure slipped along with her smile. "Are you —"

"Just watch. This doll knows her limits."

One of the freshly carved rivers that had remade Kansas rushed and frothed at its banks. The *Seismosaurus* slowed, apparently working through its slow calculations. Then it waddled into the water. The pipeline neck rose in lofty disregard of the torrent. Currents lapped and swirled higher, higher — and held a meter below their carriage chairs.

"See?"

Dwight always had more confidence in physical matters than she did. "Her head is up there. What does she care if her back gets wet?"

"Ummm. Rest easy. Feelin' okay?"

Though the pains had returned to her lower abdomen, she gave him what she hoped was a sunny smile. "Wonderful."

The beast showed no concern for the churning river. The sauropods were proving to be astonishingly versatile. They were true land animals, not the pond-loungers envisioned earlier. In the nineteenth century the first discoverers of the huge fossils had thought they were an extinct variety of whale-like reptiles. Bulk was their best defense. Challenged, they could deliver a massive, rib-crushing blow with the strong hind legs or tail.

The young ones crossed the river at a shallows further down, then raced to join their mother. Swaying, Mito let the summer heat claim her. They worked their way into some undulating hills crowded with the new fast-growth olive trees, which their mount gulped down with gravelly grunts of relish.

They met a *brachiosaurus*, russet-red among the shifting silver-greens of the olives. It thudded around a rocky ledge, surprising the humans, but provoking no reaction from the *Seismosaurus*.

Neither beast displayed hiding behavior, Mito noted abstractly. Only once had any of the sauropods shown a fighting stance, when surprised by a *holo*-projection of a model *Tyrannosaurus*. It had reared onto hind legs like an elephant, claws extended.

The *brachiosaurus* was like a smaller edition of their mount, with folds of fat and ribbed colorings of pink and blue. Over the last half-century fossil-hunters had found organic traces of nearly fifty species, and a dozen now walked the earth. The most startling differences among them were the vibrant splashes of oranges, burnt-yellows, milky blues, and rich browns that each species displayed as soon as they were weaned, as their reproductive patterns took hold. Mito watched the *brachiosaurus* approach, appreciating the contrast of colors, when

suddenly a powerful explosion jarred her.

"What —" Dwight jerked around, alarmed.

The great tail curled high above them. Fierce bellows boomed. The tail descended, a blur that abruptly sent forth a hammer-hard crack.

The *brachiosaurus* jerked, daunted. Its massive feet pounded as it turned, a sight which brought laughter from them, and then it beat a hasty retreat.

"Protecting its grazing rights," Mito said.

"And here I always thought it used that tail as a weapon."

"The best weapon is one you do not have to use."

Dwight blinked as their mount gave a loud parting shot. "Damn impressive."

"You see what this means? We humans thought we were the first creatures to break the sound barrier. But a great whip like this — it must, yes?"

He thought a moment. "Suppose so. The *dinos* beat us to it by 150 million years."

What she most loved about her life was the way surprises abounded. To bring true a deep human dream, to conjure forth the great lizards again, would have been quite enough, even without the cornucopia of amazements which followed.

Who would have guessed, she thought, that the sauropods' pursuit of mass as a defense against the meat-eaters would in the fullness of time give them immortality? The quest for sheer weight had led them to the efficiencies of hollow bones. Cradled in those chambers, the dinosaur genetic heritage slumbered for over a million centuries ... while the solid-boned meat-eaters' legacy trickled away, the helical chains besieged by the salts of ground water. Finally, the meek did inherit the earth.

The stabbing pain returned, catching at her breath.

They rose over the last line of slumped hills, and there before them spread the center of the park. The fresh, glittering river rapids lay like a string of white-water jewels in a verdant setting. Dinosaurs grazed all along the broad, lush plain, their splashes of color like gaudy ornaments. Amid the fields of tan wheat and stretching orchards were discreetly positioned cameras, observers, elite guests. Even the grandest class of all dinosaurs could spook and run, given provocation, as more than one trampled specialist had learned.

As they descended along a slow-sloping hillside, something strong and dark welled up in her. Perhaps it was the ancient sway of the great beast, or her mounting suspicions about the pain that had ebbed and returned in her now for days. Medicine had prolonged life in the best possible way: lengthening the robust days, then ending them with a sudden, sure collapse. There was little to do at the end, which was a final kindness. And if she kept her serene outer glaze, Dwight would not guess and worry until the last possible moment.

So long as it fell after *this* day, she reminded herself. A happy accident, that the Park could open at the half-century mark, and that they had both labored into this era. They could have been caught beneath the blundering incoherence of one of the first rebirths, crushed by the malformed beasts made in the first few years of experiments. Several of the unwary had been.

But no. Now the immense mass beneath them had been harnessed with skill and love.

As they descended, a cheer rose all down the ample

plain, thousands of voices giving them greeting. The sky itself swarmed and lit with the new electro-display she had heard about but never witnessed.

**KANSAS SAUROPOD PARK
OPENING CEREMONIES
DEDICATED TO MITO NAKAWA
AND DWIGHT RASER
THEY OPENED OUR PAST**

It was a dazzling iridescent display. The letters loomed across the pewter sky bowl, yellow cascading into orange.

"Y'know, I still wish we'd patented the Seismosaur DNA," Dwight said.

She laughed; he could always make her do that.

With a sudden swelling of emotion, she felt herself let go of all her concerns. This might be the last of days but it would certainly be one of the greatest. Her heart thumped with love of the man next to her, and with love for the rough beast beneath them, slouching into their strange world.

As she made ready to depart into the earth, it was arriving from its slumber, brought forth from the pressing solemn silence of a million centuries, into a territory free of the predators its kind had borne for so long. Humans might tinker all they would, but they could not with any genetic certainty reconstruct the great *Tyrannosaurus*, or all the rest of that blood-drenched legion which had bedevilled these vast, simple creatures.

She grasped Dwight's hand and drew in a breath containing scents unsensed for longer than humans had walked the world.

They would evolve, of course. But this time they would have a shepherd. □

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The Second Renaissance Foundation is a non-profit Massachusetts organization (501(c)(3) application pending), which has taken over the operation of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* in order to keep the magazine coming to you on a regular basis. While we and the staff of the magazine will be putting forth our best efforts, there may be a bump or two along the way. We ask that you please bear with us.

We are all doing this on a part-time basis, which means working evenings and weekends, and no one is being paid a salary. We may make some changes in the future, but we hope to keep the unique character of the magazine alive. We hope to restore the full-color art as soon as the economy allows.

The biggest problem we face is that it currently costs more to produce the magazine than it earns. The magazine needs to raise funds. So if you can afford a tax-deductible contribution (be it \$10, \$25, \$50, or more), and are willing to help, you can send your donation to:

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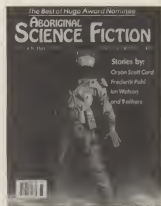
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Sliding the Edge

By Dean Whitlock

Art by Larry Blamire

Technology is moving too fast. But I'll tell you what's worse — marketing is moving faster. Everyone from IBM to L.L. Bean keeps announcing new products a year before they're due out. And then they're always a year late. And then it's another year before the bugs are out. But the customers only hear the announcements and they Want It Now. "You mean your system doesn't run on the 886? You don't have CRAM chips and stash memory and flat-plate jello screens? Thanks, we'll go next door."

And when you're a little company like us, when you've got one salesman to cover the entire continent and a marketing budget that wouldn't buy a used Cuisinart, you've got to have the latest or die. You've got to be State Of The Art. You've got to be On The Leading Edge. First with Unix, first with Menix, first with the 286, the 386, the 486, and (gasp!) the 886. First with giga DRAM, the biochip, the whipple disk, and the Direct Machine Interface. Strolling down the Leading Edge.

Problem is, one slip and you cut your ass.

Oh, you can blame Intel if you want. You can sue IBM or Mitsubishi. But what happened to Murray had a lot more to do with good old American Capitalism and the Free Market. And with vanity.

You see, God never could stand to be last at anything. Or even second. God — short for Godzilla — is owner, founder, President, and Chief of Development for DataRIP, Inc., which is where I ride the edge. His real name is Louie Framis, but he was an Olympic-grade wrestler in college, and hence the *nom de guerre*. It's a name he tries to live up to. The fact that he's five-foot-two and built like a chimp on steroids probably contributes to his competitive nature. Or maybe he snorts testosterone.

God started DataRIP with twelve hundred dollars and a guaranteed first sale to his uncle, who ran a chain of funeral homes in South Jersey. Uncle Framis wanted to computerize the coffin warehouse, and there was God, right out of college with this computer they'd made him buy to get in. God took the idea to the mat and came out with a complete Death Management System, everything from estimating the cost of embalming fluid to sending out the yearly remembrance cards. With scheduling, inventory, billing, and payroll built right in. He called it The Right Rites. Uncle Framis loved it.

Of course, it's not the only game in town. Go to any trade show and there's a dozen little companies trying to sell Death Management on PCs, and a couple of big companies pushing totally innovative, integrated, enhanced, elegant, flexible, friendly, sophisticated, state-of-the-art systems like ours, only on name-brand hardware. The funeral directors stalk among the booths like vultures in a slaughterhouse. If you can't prove your meat has the best maggots, they go dine somewhere else.

Hence the ride on the edge. DataRIP has done pretty good for a little company, but it's only because God won't stop pushing. We get the first release of everything, port

our system to it first, sell it immediately, and two months later have to plug in the work-arounds, patches, kludges, and fixes to keep our customers running. And by then, we're porting to something else anyway, so we try to get them to trade up instead of going through all of the work-arounds, fixes, etc., etc.

The porting always fell on Murray. That's why he was the first one to try the Direct Machine Interface.

Direct Machine Interface. DMI. It sounds innocuous enough, but it got announced with more hype than biochips and the quarter-inch gigadisk. A direct link between man and machine. The ultimate computer connection. Okay, so you had to learn to think in Hexadecimal. It was still the sci-fi dream come true. Just think the command and the computer does it. The results flash before your very eyes. Leading Edge with a capital EDGE.

Me, I'm just an applications programmer. I did the Flower Management Module. When cryonics got hot, I did the Cold Body Inventory Package. Pretty run-of-the-mill. But Murray was our guru. He got onto all the new hardware first, to figure out how to make our stuff run on it. He found all the bugs. Or they found him.

Murray was one of those archetypal types. When someone who's not a programmer thinks "programmer," they probably think of Murray. He had shaggy hair, a scraggly beard, and the muscle tone of an oyster cracker. He came to work at 3:30 p.m. and went home whenever. He played Go and spoke Esperanto. The fact is, most of us programmers aren't like that. We're a pretty normal bunch. We jog, we do lunch, we drive Saab Turbos, just like everybody else. But Murray ... Well, he was perfect for DMI — he already thought in Hex.

I remember the minute we got the DMI hardware. God came out of his office shouting, "Where's Murray?"

Candy stuck her head out of her carrel and shouted back, "Hey, watch the noise. I'm on the phone, Goddamnit."

"All right," God said, "I will. Damn you, phone, damn you, damn you!" He used that joke a lot.

Candy shot him the bird and ducked back into her carrel. "Look, asshole," she said into the phone, "haven't you even looked at the manual?" Candy did customer service. God punched her playfully on the arm and charged my way.

"Beirce!" he shouted. "Where's Murray?" God usually shouted, when he wasn't bellowing.

I swung my chair into the corner of my carrel, so he couldn't get at my arms. "He's in the john," I said.

"Dammit!" God bellowed. "I knew we shouldn't have put that thing in!"

He charged over to the bathroom and pounded on the door. The lock gave and the door flew open. Murray looked up from the latest copy of *Modern Chip Magazine* and



blinked twice.

"Ah," he said. He said that a lot, always with a little smile of innocent wonderment. I think it meant his CPU was swapping out data to make room for you.

"Shit or get off," God told him. "The DMI stuff is here. Meet me downstairs."

He left Murray there with no door.

"Ah," Murray said. He blinked out the doorway at Candy and me, smiled, shrugged, and went back to his article.

When he finally finished and went downstairs, I tagged along. The hardware setup room had originally been an embalming room. It had white tile walls and still smelled a little of formaldehyde. Uncle Framis had rented DataRIP his first funeral home. Personally, since he was now half-owner and Director of Marketing, I think it was a tax dodge.

God was waiting with Grace. Grace was our hardware techie, an ex-nurse who had become an embalmer for Uncle Framis because it paid better. But then she gave up deadware to get into hardware. I think she got tired of talking to stiffs. The computers could at least talk back, even if all they said was, "File Not Found." She hummed happily around the cellar, a pale, massive phantom, appearing upstairs only to shout at God when some piece of highly hyped hardware turned out to be a piece of shit. Or to play God with Murray at lunch.

"Get in here and try this on," God commanded when he saw Murray. He had a web of wires with knobby black and white electrodes spotted on it, like a hairnet with acne.

"What's that?" I asked.

"What does it look like?" God snapped. "It's a neural net."

Murray went over and smiled at Grace. She smiled back and sidled closer. Murray smiled and shifted nearer. She smiled and inclined his way. Pretty soon, his skinny thigh was lightly pressed to her massive hip. They stood side by side in front of the computer, listening to God and pretending that nothing had happened. Grace and Murray were In Love, and they thought they were the only ones who knew.

Meanwhile, God was standing on tip-toe trying to fit the neural hairnet over Murray's head.

"Bend down, you goddamn stork," he muttered.

Murray bent a little, which made his butt stick out a little, which was a temptation Grace could not resist. She reached up to brush back a lock of her hair and then let her hand slide softly across the curve of his rump as she brought it down. Murray quivered.

"Hold still!" God shouted. He stuck the electrodes in various places on Murray's head, forcing them through the thick locks of hair. The two of them looked like a National Geographic special on social grooming among the apes.

I picked up the manual from the table beside God and compared his work to the picture. The picture distinctly showed a bald-headed victim.

"You know, God," I said, "he's supposed to shave his head first."

"What?" He craned his neck around to peer into the book. "What the hell for?"

"It says, 'To ensure proper interface contact between electrode contact and contact with skin, shaving of head prior to electrode contact is necessary and recommended

for proper contact.'"

"Recommended?" Murray echoed.

I showed him. "Must be printed in Tokyo," I allowed.

"Seoul," Grace said. "It's all from Korea."

"All" was the hairnet, a cable, and a card to stick into the computer. "Computer not supplied" was printed in small type on the bottom of the back cover of the manual. But Grace had pulled one of our new 886's out of its box and had the cover off. The biochips pulsed softly under the fluorescents, waiting patiently for a couple of bytes to chew on.

God yanked the hairnet off Murray's head, which brought a loud yelp from Murray.

"Watch out," Grace scolded. "You've hurt him." She took a step toward Murray and only just managed to keep from cuddling his head in her ample bosom. She picked up a screwdriver instead, and began furiously fastening the DMI card into a spare slot in the computer. Grace was built solid, like an old mainframe, and she had a very threatening way of tightening screws.

God wasn't impressed. He tossed the hairnet on the table.

"Get his head shaved," he ordered.

"Me?" Grace demanded.

"You're hardware, aren't you?" he shouted. "Get him shaved and call me when you're ready!" Then he snatched the manual out of my hands and went up the stairs.

Grace looked at Murray with eyes filled with anguish. Her hands twitched, and I could imagine her running them lovingly through his tangled hair. They both glanced at me and then looked at other things, a tableau of frozen desire.

"I'd love to stay and watch this," I said, meaning the haircut, "but I've got a bug to catch."

As I went up the stairs, I heard a soft thump behind me, followed by a muffled "Ouch" from Murray. The rest was silence.

When I got to my desk, Candy was on the phone again. "You did what?" she said, her voice tinged with incredulous scorn. "Why the hell did you do that? ... Well, I don't care what the manual said, that's the stupidest thing you could have done. You're going to have to reload your entire database from backup ... What do you mean, 'What backup?' The cartridge, from yesterday ... Well then, get the one from last week ... Okay, last month ... What?!"

She held the handset at arm's length and shot it the bird.

"Okay," she said quietly, with the voice one uses to speak to a balky cretin. "We're going to start from scratch. Get your implementation manuals ... They're in whose office? ... Well, go in and get them ... Doesn't anyone else have the key? ... Well, when is he coming back? ... How many weeks? ... Okay, then, call me when he gets back ... What? ... Oh, just write it all down. You guys don't need a computer anyway."

She threw the handset onto the cradle and leaned back in her chair with a disgusted, "Sumbitch."

"Who was that?" I asked

"Oh, just the Air Force," she said. She leaned way back and ran her hands through her glossy, three-foot hair. "They're as bad as the insurance companies. You'd think they'd job out that kind of work." She pulled out a bag of jalapeño chips and swung around to face me. "So, what's



Flaming

up downstairs, Beirce? You didn't leave Lothario and Brunhilda alone, did you?"

"She's cutting his hair," I told her.

"Kinky. She get that idea from the *Allied Electronics Spare Parts Catalogue*?"

"It came down from God. Murray's got to be shorn before he can wear the DMI stuff."

"Ha," she snorted. "Delilah shearing the sacrificial lamb. Alas, poor Murray."

A mixed metaphor, but only too true, as it turned out.

An hour later, I heard Grace call God on the intercom. He surged out of his office toward the stairs, and Candy and I followed quietly in his wake.

We found Murray sitting sheepishly in front of the computer. Grace was standing behind him, rubbing after-shave into his scalp. I have to grant that he had a pretty good-looking dome. Well rounded, and not a freckle on it. Grace apparently thought so, too, because she was kneading the lotion into his flesh with languid strokes.

God took one look and broke out laughing. "Looks like she gave you a real *coup de grace*," he growled merrily.

"Ah?" Murray responded.

"*Coup de grace*!" God yelled, drawing out the *grace*. He punched Grace on the arm. "Get it?"

We all said, "Ha-ha."

"Buncha jerks," God mumbled. "Stop rubbing that shit on his head," he ordered Grace. "You'll screw up the connections."

"It's just aftershave," she said truculently.

"It smells like jock powder," God pronounced. "The book says to use Vaseline."

"Vaseline?" Grace repeated. Her hands hovered protectively over Murray's scalp.

"Makes a better contact," God said. "It says so in the manual."

"Since when do you read manuals?" Candy said. "Besides, it looks to me like what he needs is a good wax and polish."

Grace glared at her. Murray sat through the whole exchange in stoic calm. Or total shock.

"Don't worry, Murray," I told him. "It actually looks pretty good on you. Baldness, I mean."

"Are you kidding?" God said. "He looks like a jellybean with a beard."

Grace started to growl deep in her throat.

Murray looked up at her in alarm and roused himself. "Ah," he said, "shouldn't we, you know, get on with it?" He looked from face to face with his smile of innocence. Looking back, I think there may have been a hint of panic in there, too.

"That's what we're trying to do, Murray!" God shouted. "Get some Vaseline!" he ordered Grace.

"Me?" she said. "What the hell am I going to have Vaseline around for?"

"Ah, isn't there some left in your purse?" Murray asked. We all turned and stared at him, except Grace, who turned red to the roots of her hair and wouldn't look at anybody. Murray said, "Oh," and wilted back into silence.

"Great for chapped lips," Candy allowed into the silence.

"Wherever it is, get it!" God bellowed.

Grace went into her office and came back with a small jar of Vaseline. God snatched it out of her hand and pulled off the top. He smeared out a fingerful and advanced on

Murray. Murray closed his eyes and held his breath.

"I'll do that," Grace snarled. "I'm hardware." And she advanced on God.

After a brief exchange of shouts, Grace and God sorted out their roles. He quoted from the manual, while she put Vaseline on Murray and arranged the DMI hairnet. It took a minute for them to find a reference point on Murray that matched the one on the Asiatic head pictured in the manual, but eventually they had all the electrodes glued down with Vaseline.

"Okay," said God, shutting the manual and rubbing his big hands together. "Time to boot the sucker. You ready, Murray?"

"Ah ... " Murray said.

"Good! Ready, Grace?"

"Let me just —"

"Good! Let's do it!" God turned on the computer.

There was the usual beep and hum as the fan powered up, the usual click and chunk as the heads unlocked in the disk drive, the usual *shlurp* as the biochips went vapid. We all looked at the monitor to see what was happening.

Only there wasn't a monitor. No friendly glowing screen with the little picture and the "Please Wait" message that meant the system was checking its guts and was going to boot up just fine. There was just Murray, with his eyes kind of glazed and that silly innocent smile stuck on his face.

We all paused a second, waiting for him to say, "Ah."

He didn't.

Candy spoke first. "What's happening?" she said to no one in particular. No one at all answered her.

God and Grace leaned in closer to Murray, like they expected to be able to read his eyeballs. Candy and I craned around behind them, trying to see if they actually could.

"What's happening?" Candy asked again.

"He's still booting up," God said.

"How can you tell?" Candy asked.

"Because he's just sitting there!" God snapped. "If he was up and running, he'd be able to tell us what was happening."

Candy looked as skeptical as I felt. The computer was humming along too quietly. There's a little light that blinks whenever the system is reading from the disk, and that wasn't blinking at all. Which meant either that the system was already up, or that it was dead in the water. And I didn't like the way that phrase turned in my mind.

Candy must have had the same feeling. "Hey, Murray!" she yelled suddenly. "You in there?"

God and Grace jumped so high they hit their heads together.

"Christ!" God shouted. "Don't shout like that! He's doing fine!"

But Grace wasn't so sure. She bent down again and spoke right in Murray's ear. "Murray?" she said softly. "Are you okay?"

Murray just sat there.

"Murray?" Grace said. "Can you hear me?"

Murray just smiled.

Grace turned around slowly. Her face was very pale. "God," she said, "he's not ... he's not...he's not —"

"What's the matter?" God said. "Are you caught in a loop, caught in a loop, caught in a loop?" He started

laughing and put his arm around her shoulders. Then he glared at Candy and me and gestured with his free hand. We joined in with a few weak laughs.

"Everything's fine," God said heartily. "Murray's probably so caught up in the experience that he doesn't notice us. He's probably speaking Esperanto with the operating system. In a minute or two, he'll say something and scare us all half to death."

We stood there for ten minutes, while God's arm drooped and Grace's stiff upper lip softened and fell.

"How about we check the old manual," I said finally.

"That's it!" God yelled. He jerked his arm off Grace's shoulder and grabbed for the manual. Grace retreated to her work bench and fiddled nervously with a screwdriver. God flipped through the pages, back and forth, looking randomly without seeing a thing. Finally, he shoved the book into Candy's hands. "You're customer service!" he yelled. "Figure it out!"

"Thanks," Candy drawled, with one of her demeaning glances. She opened the book and looked for an index. There wasn't one, so she looked in the table of contents. That had two sections: "Setup" and "Appendix A."

"Try the appendix," I suggested, peering over her shoulder.

"Good idea," she said. By her tone, I could tell what kind of cretin she classed me with.

She flipped to the appendix and stopped dead.

"What's the matter?" Grace said, her voice just a note shy of violence.

"It's in Korean," Candy said.

Grace snapped the screwdriver in half.

"Let me see that!" God snarled. He jerked the book out of Candy's hands and glared at the pages. They refused to translate. "Okay," he said, throwing the manual behind him, "let's reboot him." He reached for the switch.

Grace shrieked and slapped his hand away.

"What the hell?" God shouted, rubbing his injured wrist.

"Don't you touch that switch," Grace told him. "Murray's hooked up to that thing."

"Jesus, I'm just going to reboot it!" God shouted.

"Not while he's hooked up to it!" Grace shouted back.

"Then we'll unplug him!" God bellowed. And he yanked out the cord connecting the hairnet to the computer.

Murray's face went slack. His head lolled back. He started to drool.

Grace screamed, "Yah!" and wrenched the cable from God's hand with a straight-arm that sent him flying against the wall. Then she turned and jammed the plug back into the computer. Murray closed his mouth, sat up straight, and resumed his smile.

God rebounded from the wall with the simian agility that had made him Master of the Mats. He went for the power switch on the computer, but Candy yelled, "Look out!" and Grace spun and hip-checked him under the table. He rolled to his feet on the other side and came up in his old wrestler's crouch. His eyes glinted with challenge. His lips were drawn back in a half-smile. His canines shone yellow in the harsh light.

Grace came around the table after him, head tucked between her shoulders, big arms reaching. It was The Gibbon versus The Bulldog. Godzilla meets The Mad Amazon.

God lunged for her legs, but she ducked her head and

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tied him up, cheek to cheek, arms locked, leaning and testing, looking for a weakness. God's apelike reach stretched all the way to Grace's rump. He wrapped an arm around one thigh and gave a mighty heave. He might have been yanking on a redwood. Grace didn't budge. Then he tried to twist her over the other way. She stayed still, and he turned red.

Suddenly, he cupped a hand under each big buttock and tried to roll her backwards into a take-down. But Grace just spread her massive legs and stood up. God's feet dangled in space. Then Grace fell forward. On God.

Candy dove on her belly beside them and peered into the narrow crack between Grace and the floor. "Pini!" she yelled.

If it wasn't a pin, it sure was one hell of a predicament.

God's arms and legs — which were all you could see of him — wiggled feebly, but Grace wasn't taking any chances. She waited till they stopped moving completely. Then she spun him out and had him in a full nelson before you could say "leading edge." He sucked in a huge breath of air and started to turn pink again.

"Uncle?" Candy said.

God snarled, but he nodded. That is, he tried to nod. Grace got the idea anyway and let him go. She stood and stepped back warily, keeping herself between him and the computer. God uncrooked his neck and stood up. He shook himself like a bear with a wounded ego and looked like he wanted to go two for three. Grace narrowed her eyes and started growling again. She was ready.

God stuck one fat finger under her nose. "Get him fixed!" he ordered. "You're hardware, and don't you forget it!"

He spun around and nearly took out Candy. "What the hell are you doing here?" he bellowed. He glared around at all of us and shouted, "Get back to work!" Then he charged up the stairs.

Candy turned back to Grace. But Grace was bent over Murray, holding his face in her big hands and whispering pet names to him. He smiled back vacantly. I gave Candy a nudge and we tip-toed up the stairs.

On my way out that evening, I went downstairs and peeked into the hardware room. Murray was still smiling. Grace was slumped over the table beside him, and I couldn't tell if she was asleep or crying. She had plugged a keyboard and monitor into the computer, and I went in far enough to read the screen. It said, "File Not Found."

I snuck out quietly.

When I came in the next morning, Candy was in her carrel with her feet up, reading the swimsuit issue of *PC World*.

"What do you think, Beirce?" she asked, showing me a picture of what had to be a genetically enhanced woman in what seemed to be a trio of recycled floppy disks.

"You'd get more cover braiding your hair," I told her.

She smiled smugly and ran a hand back through as much of its honey-brown length as she could reach.

I sat down and was reaching for my keyboard when the intercom blared into life. "Are you here yet?" God snarled.

"The flesh is here," I said.

God missed the rejoinder, which said something about his mood. Instead, he barged out of his office with a Federal Express box under his arm. "Let's go," he commanded. "Both of you."

I said, "Where?" But he charged by and went down the

stairs at flank speed. Candy and I shrugged at each other and followed.

We came down to the hardware room and found God standing stock still in the doorway, gaping at the place where Murray had been. Murray was still there, but he wasn't slouched in the chair. Instead, he was slouched in one of Uncle Framis's best walnut coffins, propped up on a pile of plush velvet cushions. IV bottles hung from the old hooks on the ceiling, and tubes led down into his ankles and wrists. Grace was just inserting another tube into something under the white shroud that covered his skinny frame. I flinched at the thought. Murray just sat there with the same innocent grin.

"What the hell ...?" God started, but he trailed off in mid-shout. It was obvious which Hell.

"He's gotta eat," Grace said. She finished with whatever she'd been entubing and went around checking the flow in the IV tubes.

"He's gonna eat just fine," God snapped. "We're going in after him."

At which point I noticed the watch cap pulled down to his ears. "What do you mean, 'in'?" I said.

He dumped the box on the table and pulled off the hat. His newly-shaved head gleamed greenly under the fluorescents. He'd already coated it with Vaseline.

"I've got three sets of the DMI hardware," he said, ripping open the box and pulling out wads of bubble wrap. "We can stick 'em in another 886, network it with Murray's, and go in after him."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Candy asked, staring dangerously at God's gleaming greasy dome.

"You, me, and Beirce here," God said. "Who the hell else do you think? Between the three of us, we ought to be able to talk Murray into coming out."

"Wait a minute," I said, my mind racing with the clarity that only fear can bring. "You think Murray chose to stay in there?"

"Look at him," God said, waving a DMI card toward the bed. "He's happy!"

"Happy?" I countered. "Take another look. There's no one home in there. He's gone."

"He is not gone!" Grace wailed.

"Oh, Jesus, Grace," I said. "I didn't mean —"

"She's right," God said. "He's in there on the electronic version of the can reading the electronic version of *Mr. Chips*." Muscles clenched on his sagittal crest at the thought. "And we're gonna drag him out!"

"Now, look, God," I said, feeling like I could use a minute or two on the can myself, "Murray had a lot to live for."

"Bullshit!" he bellowed. "What did he have out here that he can't get from that computer?"

Grace began to growl again.

God didn't notice. He pulled an electric shaver out of his pocket and tossed it to Candy. "Get shaved!" he told her.

Candy started to growl, too.

God noticed. Candy was a lot smaller than Grace, but she had an evil snarl. God looked back and forth between them, trying to decide which threat to answer first. He decided both.

"I said get shaved, Beirce!" he bellowed. "Murray needs Grace, and you and I are going in to bring him out!"

"Now, let's think this through," I said, backing toward

the door. I looked around to check the distance to the stairs, but Candy stepped in between. She tapped the shaver rhythmically in the palm of her left hand.

"Why don't you sit down, Beirce?" she said. "It'll be easier to reach the top."

"Candy," I said, "you can't do this to me."

"Murray needs you," she said, advancing deliberately toward me. "Right, Grace?"

I spun around and saw Grace advancing from the other side. She had her hands out in her wrestler's grope. Her eyes were fixed on my scalp.

"Grace," I said desperately, "what if we get stuck in there? You'll have to take care of three of us." She kept coming. I backed up, till I felt the cold tile wall chilling my back. "Candy," I begged, "I'll buy you the swimsuit." She smiled and clicked on the shaver. "At least wait till we get the manual in English," I wailed.

But they kept coming, Grace to the right of me, Candy to the left, and God advancing from the front. I had less chance than the Light Brigade. My legs felt like jelly. My bladder felt worse. But at the last minute, panic took over. Shrieking like a banshee, I dove for the narrowing gap between Grace and God.

They both lunged sideways and smashed together with a meaty thwack. I twisted to the left, for the sudden ally where God had been and the clear shot at the stairs beyond.

Candy was ready for me. As I dodged through, she jumped on my back and dug in her heels. I staggered for the stairs, while she whooped and hollered and mowed my head with the shaver. Then Grace and God were upon me, and it was all over. They had me lashed in a chair — the one Murray had used, I realized, clenching my sphincter — and shorn in minutes. Grace produced the Vaseline, and God got out the manual. Candy put on the hairnet. The electrodes felt cold as the balls of Hell.

Then Candy and Grace fitted up God, while I babbled like a madman, trying to point out the error of their ways. They weren't listening.

"Right!" God said, when they were done. He brushed back the front of the hairnet — he didn't have enough forehead to support it — and pointed at Grace. "Plug us into the network!" She strung a cable between the two computers. God pointed at Candy. "Plug in the DMI!" She connected our cables to the back of our computer. It sounded like a knife striking bone.

"Ready?" God said.

"Ready!" said Candy.

"Ready!" said Grace.

I said, "Aaaaaaa!"

Someone from the stairs said, "Really, Louis, what is all this Fuss?"

And we all stared at the stairs.

Uncle Framis came down into the room like my own personal *deus ex machina*.

We all started talking at once, me in a shrill monotone that would have broken glass. Uncle Framis held up his hand, and we trailed to a stop. You have to understand that Uncle Framis was not only God's partner. He was also our salesman, marketing department, and financial officer. He was taller than Murray, thinner than Candy, and given to black suits, black bow ties, and black arm-bands. He looked, spoke, and smelled Undertaker. When he held up his hand like that, you stopped. You adopted

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a reverent silence, tinged with guilt and a sense of utter futility. Even God was hushed.

Uncle Framis noticed the coffin, the tubes, and Murray grinning in the middle. He clasped his hands, raised an eyebrow, and nodded mournfully. His adam's apple bobbed in rhythm.

"And who is the Loved One?" he asked.

Grace started sobbing. God started to explain about the DMI, the manual, poor Murray, and me. Uncle Framis stopped nodding and started shaking his head. God trailed off.

"Oh, no," Uncle Framis intoned, "oh, no, no, no, no, no."

"No?" God echoed. "What do you mean, No?"

"Really, Louis," Uncle Framis said, "we can't sell DMI."

"We can't?" God said. His volume was slowly rising back to its normal level. "Why the hell not?"

"It's Old Hat," Uncle Framis said. "Yesterday's News. Nobody wants DMI anymore."

"But it just came out!" God shouted.

"Not soon enough," Uncle Framis said. "There's something Newer."

"Newer?" God screamed. "This doesn't even work yet!" He yanked the hairnet off his head and shook it in Uncle Framis's face. "What could be newer?"

Uncle Framis just shook his head mournfully. "Mice," he said.

God went apoplectic. "Mice?" he shrieked. "Mice went out with silicon!"

"Mice are nostalgic," Uncle Framis said. He smiled lugubriously. "And these mice are Bionic. They're cuddly." God was struck dumb.

"Cuddly?" Candy said.

Uncle Framis nodded. "They've finally made computers Loveable," he said. "Come along, Louis. We've got some planning to do."

God snarled, but he went. Uncle Framis took his arm and led him up the stairs.

"Sumbitch," Candy said.

And a tinny voice answered her with, "Ah ..."

We spun around and stared at Murray, but he just sat there with his eyes glazed and his silly grin peeking out from under the hairnet. Candy edged over toward the coffin. Grace stood stock still, quivering between hope and despair. I, of course, was still lashed to the chair.

"Murray?" Candy said softly. "Are you in there?"

No lips moved, but something answered her. "Ah ...," it said, "are you out there?" We all looked at the computer. It had Murray's syntax, if not his tone.

"Sumbitch," Candy said again.

Grace fell to her knees at the keyboard, mouthing in tongues.

"Hellooooo," the computer said. "Grace? Sweet Knees? If you're out there, type something at me, okay?"

"Sweet Knees?" Candy said. "Sweet Knees?"

We couldn't help ourselves. We both stared at Grace's knees. But Grace was already pounding away at the keys. And the computer was responding.

"Well, it's kind of dark, actually, but other than that, it's quite comfortable. Yes, I love you, too. Yes, I'd like to, too. Yes — ah ... are you alone?" Grace turned and looked at us in a distracted sort of way.

Candy got the hint. She set me loose, unhooked the hairnet, and led me out, wiping the Vaseline off as we went. I moped around in hats of various types for the next

few months, and eventually she bought the swimsuit and made amends.

And Murray? He's still down in the basement, hooked up to his computer and his tubes, a victim of technology. Not that he hasn't been a real asset to the firm. It took about two weeks for people to get sick of putting clean paper under the bionic mice, and by then, Murray had figured out how to take input from a mike. God immediately announced the first foolproof voice recognition system. It took another week, but Murray finally figured out how to copy the important parts of himself so we could sell the damn thing. It's kind of embarrassing how small the file is.

So DataRIP made a fortune on MURI, the Mellow User Response Interface. People love it. No more typing. No more meaningless error messages. You don't like the results of your spreadsheet? Just talk to MURI, he'll fix it for you, without intimidation. Let's face it, it's hard to feel anxious around a computer that starts every sentence with a meek little, "Ah ..."

Meanwhile, Murray One is comfortably enthroned in his coffin with Grace to tend to his every need. He's even gaining weight. Of course, he still has that silly grin stuck to his face, and Grace has to roll him over every now and then to keep the blood from pooling in his butt, but — just between you and me — I think he's capable of a lot more Input/Output than he lets on. Don't tell God, but Grace is pregnant. □

Our Next Issue

The next double-issue of *Aboriginal* will feature "The Secret Language of Old White Ladies," by Patricia Anthony, a glimpse of satellite broadcast power targeting a rural setting. Jamil Nasir will return with "Sunlight," a grim fable of viral infection from space. Joining in with a macabre addition will be John W. Randal, who will tell us about "Dead Cows." Steven M. Ford examines what technology might do to the hereafter with his chilling "Set a Place for Arthur," and Jerry J. Davis offers an amusing insight into what can happen to those who ignore the rules when they use someone else's software in "The Penalties of Pirating." Wendy Wheeler gives a new twist to time travel in her first *Aboriginal* appearance, with "June 14, 1959."

Spicing up the rest of the issue will be "Spin," by K.D. Wentworth, a tale of growing up in a gritty cyberpunkish future; "Patterns of Little Gods," by Sharan Newman, a strange tale of bioengineered regeneration on a colony planet distant in time and space. The bittersweet taste of alien love is proffered in "Deezee" by James C. Glass, while a different sort of relationship is explored in "I Love You for Seventy Mental Reasons," by Amy Benesch, and corporate love of power and politics is given a sharp tweak by Gary Raham in "Succession." Heroism and survival in space are the themes of Gerald Page's "The Claim Station," and Robert Kozinets will round things out with "Ping Enclosed," a story we won't even hint about.

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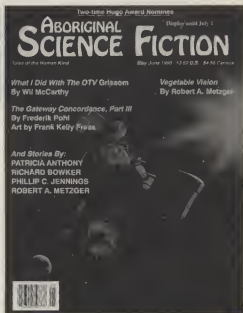


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Sid Dex

(Continued from Page 5)

New Town's just a sealed-off playground for the rich. And for visiting royalty, like Lady Celia Pettingworth. Watching the train descend to New Town's Futura Station, the Fair's obelisk needle stabbing at the evening sky, I figured she was just another inbred snob with an iron-laced brassiere.

"Come in, the door is open." A distinctively female voice answered Dexter's knock at the Hotel Essex's penthouse suite door. Dexter was never one to disobey an order, especially of the feminine variety, so he strode in. The hotel room was an Art Deco nightmare: chromed doors, black appliqué floors, and a working Italian marble fountain in the middle of it all, naked cherubs splashing water into blue porcelain urns. A woman in a frilly satin negligée appeared in one of the archways, hair entwined swami-like in a towel; her looks instantly shattered any of a hundred of Dexter's personal theories about royalty.

"Funny, you don't look like room service," She smiled rather fetchingly, folding her arms across her bosom as she leaned precariously against the Romanesque archway.

"Oh, I don't know," Dexter removed his fedora. "It just all depends upon what's your idea of room service." The woman's smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"Well, then, who the bloody hell are you?" she snapped quietly, her English heritage rising to the occasion.

"Just an old Colonial soldier paying his respects. You are Lady Celia Pettingworth?"

"What's it to you?" She glided to a side table and a hotel phone, picking up the receiver, the other hand on the switch hook. "Explain quickly."

"We have a mutual friend. Vincente Raphael, faithful servant and family mascot. I came to offer my condolences ..." The Lady put down the phone and took up a nearby cigarette holder instead. "... during your period of mourning."

"That is, as you Americans put it, so much crap. I do not recall Vincente lowering himself to having any American friends. Especially those who dress down." She held the cigarette holder to her lips. The flame from Dexter's Waco lighter reflected cobalt in her eyes as he passed it beneath the cigarette's end. "Now please leave."

"I'm glad to see you're taking this so well. Your widow's attire would make even Scarlett O'Hara blush with envy."

"What did you expect? A floor-length flannel bed nightgown and a lace shawl to cover my face, mister ...?" She exhaled a long stream of smoke, not unlike the contrail of a stratojet.

"Dexter. Sid Dexter. You might say that Vincente the Valet has retained my services. I'm here to ask you a few questions ..." Before he could finish, Lady Pettingworth had filled the room with a sizable laugh, tossing the ashes from her smoker into the gurgling fountain.

"You're a private detective? My goodness, I thought for a moment you were some sort of policeman."

"I was. Once."

"Well, what sort of radioflick did you fall out of, Mister Dexter? I must say you have the proper costume and the mannerisms. Did Vincente find you at the radiomovie theater? Or did he simply dial Central Casting? I always

thought Vincente had a rather dry sense of humor ..."

"He might. It's all he has left. I'm looking for a key that fits a certain 1929 Rolls-Royce. One that will enable him to claim what is legally his." Dexter none-too-gently reached up and snapped the burning cigarette off the lady's holder, flicking the glowing red ember into the fountain.

"You have a very poor attitude, Mister Dexter."

"Sorry, it's written in the script. Now can we stop palling around here for a moment and just answer my questions?"

"And if I refuse?" She edged herself against one of the penthouse multi-pane windows, the Chicago night skyline framing her slim form. Dexter tried not to notice that the shimmering negligée was transparent in some interesting places.

"I can't force you to answer my questions. And I can't arrest you. But I can get others involved. Others who can tie you up in legal doubleknots that would make any decent Boy Scout shiver. Vincente may never get what's inside the Rolls. And you might end up with nothing too. You don't look like the type who would last too long without these kind of surroundings."

"Yes, I have grown rather accustomed to my space." She smiled, her voice more childlike and sweet. "But I am afraid I don't have the key to my father's motor carriage." Then it changed abruptly to a low hiss. "And I sincerely hope that Vincente and you never find it in your lives."

"Just between you and me, kid, jealousy doesn't become you."

"I am not jealous. I'm protecting my father from that man. Oh, I'm sure he gave you quite the clever little act, that Raphael. That basset-hound complexion, the ever-faithful dog who has lost his master. Did he dust the chair out of habit, with that buzzing static-shaver he keeps? Did he tell you about his family? Or the long line of relatives he has to support? I have not met a more despicable, greedy little soul in my entire life ..."

"Sounds like what we have here is a classic family dispute. Daddy spoils little girl. Faithful servant feels gypped and wants what's coming to him. I feel sort of sorry for you two, having to duke it out like this." Dexter rather enjoyed his play on words. "But the law is the law. And if Vincente Raphael wants inside that car, he can get a warrant from the court to have a locksmith bust the Rolls open if need be. So why don't you just count your losses, lick your wounds, or whatever you limeys do, and give him the damn key." Dexter had hoped his speech would have some sort of effect. Only the opposite happened. She started giggling again. Dexter frowned, "Something funny?"

"Oh, they'll have some time breaking into that car. Damn impossible. I remember when Daddy lost the key once, or at least he thought he had. He called everyone from the town blacksmith to the Royal Chancellor of the Tower of London. No one could open that car. Not even Rolls-Royce with its own key cut from the original blank. The car is rather special, Mister Dexter. In more ways than just as the object of my Father's admiration. He loved that car ..." Her voice trailed off as she looked to the sparking fountain. She moved to the bar, quietly tossing ice and vermouth into two large tumblers.

"... even more than you?"

She nodded silently, watching the ice melt as she

poured. "I don't have the key, Mister Dexter. God, I wish I did. The wonderful things that car did. The wonderful times. All gone now."

"So what is it about this car? My uncle was a Caddy salesman, owned one of the first Fleetwoods with the aero option on it. A flying car is not so special. Hell, the Wright brothers could have probably made my old Schwinn Fireball bike fly if they had a mind to it."

"It does more than just fly." She handed him the drink and smiled like a child relating the first time she had climbed a tree to its top and gazed around at the world. "Can't you understand that?" The dream vanished as her gaze fell back upon the moody-dark structures of New Chicago and Dexter. "Don't you dare help him find it! I swear I'll kill you on sight if I find out you've helped Raphael! He's a monster! All he ever does is want! Don't give it to him, Dexter! You can do that, can't you? Just drop the case." Her voice had changed from berating to pleading as she raced to a purse sitting on an ivory-trimmed chair, digging inside the leather. "I can pay you! Twice as much as Raphael. Three times! How much do you cost?"

She looked up and all that was there was Dexter's highball glass, perched on the fountain's basin.

Sometimes people just don't want to hear the truth, even when it's broadcasting loud and clear, picking up only the signals they like. This case, my very first case, was turning into trouble. This was one of those times when my old police desk sergeant used to say, "Sometimes to go forward you have to take a step back ... it's better not to see everything so clear." My problem was I wanted to solve this case so bad I couldn't see what was going on around me. Which just might get me damn killed.

The elevators of the Hotel Essex were unique, that is to say they were more of a novelty than functional. Composed of glass and steel cylinders, they rushed and slipped along the hotel's outer spine. For the unintimidated, the elevators offered breathtaking views of New Town and the World's Fair with its trademark obelisk and periscope. To those who dreaded great height, a potentially non-stop ride to the nearest therapist's couch. When the Essex first opened, its builders proudly proclaimed that a nurse and oxygen were kept standing by on the observation decks for just such ridiculous purposes. Dexter had never known anyone to require any oxygen, let alone a nurse, while staying at the Essex. Not yet, anyway.

Dexter's elevator stopped for no reason at the twenty-eighth floor. He was the sole occupant, and considering that this particular elevator served only the hotel's penthouse suites, he also thought it odd that the elevator would stop on one of the regular floors. The doors parted and two large men promptly filled the space. They both stood there, neither entering nor permitting the light-beam activated doors to close.

"Going down, eh, bloke?" one of them spoke in Cockney drawl. More Brits, Dexter thought drily. The other grinned, revealing several gaping holes where teeth should have been. They were bruisers, hardly the types who stayed in five-star hotels.

"That really depends on your point of view, friend."

Dexter grinned his best and decked the Cockney right on the bridge of his wart-filled nose. Chicago police tactics — forget busting jaws, just take your man down. Neither man was expecting Dexter to lash out, but Toothless was

not slow, either. He charged into Dexter, and they both were thrown against the glass elevator wall. Dexter broke the clench and stomped on the man's instep, wishing he had his old police nightstick. Toothless groaned and backed away enough for Dexter to land a left to his temple.

He saw the flash of metal in his peripheral — the stovepipe barrel of a sawed-off shotgun coming his way. He drew the Colt just as Toothless was charging blindly at him. Both guns went off, a double report in the elevator's tiny area.

The Colt's shockslug punched through the Cockney's shoulder, knocking the man's aim wide. Glass shattered from the shotgun's blast as Toothless ran into Dexter. Then all Dexter could see was the night sky above and Toothless ... on the long way down.

This is not a good way to begin a career, Dexter thought wildly as he clung to the steel edge of the elevator floor, glass fragments fluttering past like razor-sharp snowflakes. For a moment he considered tossing his gun and holding on with both hands, like any sensible guy about to plummet twenty-eight floors would, until he saw the Cockney — clumsily trying to recock the shotgun. He did not look very pleased.

"Ya killed Eddie!" he swore over his pain, stumbling with the weapon. A race of sorts had begun. Dexter tried hauling himself up, his left palm bleeding, a cool September breeze fluttering underneath his trenchcoat. His hand slipped, nearly dropping the gun.

"This bugger's gonna die!" The shotgun clicked with a metallic *kerr-chunk!* Dexter threw his body upward, scrambling for leverage on the glass-strewn floor. The Cockney braced himself against the elevator door. "Ya hear me, toodles? Do ya hear me?!" He brought the gun up with his good arm.

Unable to raise himself, Dexter fired — not at the Cockney, but at the elevator door frame and the safety eye-beam. The doors snapped shut, sandwiching the Cockney like a grape press. The shotgun tumbled from the Cockney's still-twitching hand.

"Yeah, I heard you," Dexter grunted as he crawled back into the elevator car. A shrill bell went off, as if the elevator itself was screaming for someone to save it from further injury. Dexter leveled the Colt at the control panel and kept pulling the trigger until it finally gave up. He regarded the waffled form trapped between the doors. Only gurgles came from the narrow recess.

"Who? Damn it!" he yelled into the doors. The distorted face moved its lips as if to speak, then stopped. A stream of blood dribbled from the Cockney's gaping mouth to the finely-polished floor. Shaking his head, Dexter moved to the elevator's emergency panel and began to struggle with the mechanical door release.

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and June or July, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. The U.S. Postal Service usually won't forward copies, and destroys them. We cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee.

"Next time, I'll take the stairs."

Mine's a funny world. Most guys would have gone home, taken off their coats, and tossed that damn investigator certificate out the window. Then again, most guys don't get tossed out of elevators and turn their opponents into yesterday's deli special. I didn't bother to stick around to find out who they were, and left just as the arriving police were scratching their collective heads. I faked innocence and headed for the last lead I had left — the Rolls. Tomorrow I could unpack; right now a few things were bugging me.

Being an ex-cop, I was sort of wise to the ways of the local bureaucracy. The city worked its magic on a red carpet of forms and procedures. If you looked right, and acted right, you just might get what you were looking for. Fortunately, Raphael had supplied me with all the car's paddock information and even the building number earlier. But Customs doesn't like to work beyond banking hours. That means a wait until morning. But why go in as a private when you can be a general?

Health inspector." Dexter flashed an official-looking badge to a solitary guard as he passed through the darkened warehouse doorway. Dexter looked as cross and bored as possible, like any other pencil-neck working long hours on a dull job. He chewed from a bag of roasted peanuts, making sure to spit an indigestible husk on the paved floor every now and then.

"Whoa, whoa!" The guard ran up behind him, a youngster with little time on his pension and a lot of space between his ears. "Hey, buddy, you can't just walk in here like that! Stop!" Putting on a look of unforgivable irritation, Dexter finally stopped, making certain to pocket his P.I. badge in his coat.

"What do you want? It's nearly ten, my wife is screaming that I cheat her in bed, my three kids all want to go to private school, and my Chevy's in the garage for the third time. I repeat, pal, what the hell do you want?"

"If you're from Health, what the hell are you doing here tonight? We ain't got no fruit or veggies in this building. That's the Parklane Refrigerated Holding Pen, up the street."

"I'm not looking for any fruits or veggies, Chiquita!" Dexter raised his voice a degree, sounding completely irked now. "It's just like you Customs boys to crap all over and complain so that my head guy's gotta pull me outta dinner just so I can look for some *rodentius communus* and report back that yes indeed sir, there's *rodentius* in the building, sir!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" The guard's expression froze, not liking the invented Latin terms Dexter threw his uneducated way. "What is *rodentius* comm ...?" The man grew flustered over the words. Dexter popped a peanut into his mouth, grinding it into butter with one chew.

"Rats, my dear captain." Dexter gave the man an instant promotion. "Rabid rats. From Spain, I believe. Damn near cat-sized." He passed the bag to the man. "Want a nut, Bugs?"

"No, thanks." The man paled. "You better get going."

Dexter saluted, "Aye aye, sir." And started off, but not before turning around in mid-stride. "By the way, you better lock your office door, just in case. You never know, hmmm?"

The guard did not have to be told twice.

And there it was. Sitting amidst an endless, unorganized assortment of shipping crates and goods from distant ports was the polished silver and black greyhound, a bright yellow shipping tag dangling from its chromed door handle. The scene was all the more interesting because some person was intent on the auto's front end, trying to yank the famous Rolls-Royce hood ornament, an angel taking flight under albatross's wings, off the radiator. Dexter leaned against a tall, black rectangular crate marked TYCHO LUNAR CRATER 1 — DO NOT EXPOSE TO SUNLIGHT and watched, still popping nuts.

No, the person was not removing the hood ornament. The ornament had been designed to absorb minor impacts, and the person was pushing it, a little at first, then to its fullest extent, until finally ...

"Oh, God, it can't be that easy," Dexter's voice made Celia Pettingworth whirl around, one hand over her mouth, as a golden watch chain and key slipped out from inside the hollow chrome angel.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded as Dexter stepped forward and gently picked up the gold chain.

"Thought I'd ask you the same. Sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings, but your two pals aren't around anymore. Eddie did a half-gainer out the hotel elevator, and I believe your other pal just invented a new way to make pressed duck. Too bad he'll never collect on the royalties, though."

She tried to take the key, but he easily tossed it out of her grasp. "I don't know any Eddie! Now give that back to me! That belonged to my father!"

"Temper, temper! My lady, you doth act like the spoiled brat that you are. You can't go around killing people and not expect people to be nosy. Especially since I want to know what's so darn special about this car. So I'm going to impound both you and this sterling sardine can and let the cops take a can-opener to the both of you until this matter is solved."

"That won't be necessary, Mister Dexter." Vincente Raphael appeared, gun leveled. "You will drop your weapon to your feet, please. Gently."

"I warned you!" Celia icily regarded Dexter as he slowly complied.

"Kick it away now." The Colt drew sparks as it scraped the floor.

"Why the cannon, Raphael?" Dexter put up his hands, turning so as to shield the lady partially. "You're entitled to whatever's in the car. Legally."

"There are those among us who would rather I not come to possess this." His eyes bulged as he saw the watch chain and its captive dangling in Dexter's hand. "I must congratulate you now on the completion of your first and only case. Such luck, finding a novice who happens to be good at what he does. I had originally thought the Lady Celia had the key and you would manage to obtain it. Thus the reason behind your little reception at the elevator."

"Oh, so those were your friends."

Raphael smiled ungraciously. "No matter. Two fewer on the payroll. I've waited over twenty-seven years for this." Raphael began to chuckle, so close to ending his quest. "Now then, my dear Mister Dexter, you shall give me that key!" The gun audibly clicked as he pulled the

hammer back.

Dexter chuckled in a pretty good imitation of the valet and shook his head as he slumped against the Rolls's polished front with his hands still raised, "Will someone please tell me what the hell it is about this damn car? Gold in the trunk? Oh, I know, it has to be diamonds, you and the Duke were in lower Africa, you know ..."

"Do be quiet!" Raphael yelled, not taking his gaze off his prize. Then, for some mad reason only he knew, he began to laugh. "You idiot. Hasn't she told you? That's no mere auto behind you."

"Oh, really? I suppose I would be 'better off with a Buick'?"

"Fool. It's a time machine. A motor carriage for traveling through time! Duke Lionel was an explorer of worlds beyond even science's ken!"

Dexter yawned. "And I thought the Warner Brothers had the market cornered on all the Looney Toons ..."

Vincent continued to rant. "We were traveling through South America when the Duke found the device in a Peruvian temple. An enunciator, he called it, a key that opened the very gates of time, perhaps used by other time visitors. But did he share his damned prize? Of course not! He installed the thing in that auto. Tell him, Lady Pettingworth! Tell him of the lands we have journeyed to together ..." His eyes had truly gone wild with excitement. "Rome. Alexandria. Athens. Peking. To sit and watch Caesar at the Colosseum. William the Conqueror storm English shores! Queen Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius's fleet on the Nile! History itself lay at our feet. But did my beloved Duke ever see the gold locked away in the monasteries? The riches of the tsars? The treasures taken by Napoleon? Certainly not! All that blessed fool ever did was ... take notes!"

Celia shouted from behind the protection of Dexter's shoulder. "My father was an explorer! Not a thief!"

"He was a fool! A damned old fool! And it took over twenty-seven years for the miserable sod to die. What has he got to show for it? Notebooks! Manuscripts! Pages upon pages of tiny little scribbles that no scientific fool would ever believe. This is what is waiting inside that autocar for me, Mister Dexter. But I am going to take what really should be mine. Now give me that key or else I will shoot the girl!" He leveled the pistol. "Then you."

Dexter sighed, ignoring the gun. "Brits ..." He tossed the key and its chain high into the warehouse air, a brass ring just out of Vincent's reach, while throwing Celia and himself to the shelter of several crates. Celia struggled against his grip as he sought cover for them both.

"You fool, you let him have it! How could you let him get the key!"

"This is the thanks I get for not letting him ventilate us?" Dexter watched as Raphael swept up the fallen key from the antler of a mislaid moose-head trophy. He ran to the Rolls and opened it, throwing himself inside. "Besides, I'm out my fee from that damn butling bilge rat!" A strange, low growl began to come from the vehicle.

"He's getting away! Don't you understand?! He'll wreck time itself!"

"Calm down. He's going nowhere. That car's practically buried with all that stuff around."

A blue glow washed over the Rolls, accompanying the symphony that was steadily building with the intensity of an orchestral climax. The car's polished skin began to

shimmer.

"Then again..." he murmured in amazement, eyes wide. He grabbed Celia by the shoulders. "Where the hell's he going?"

"It's too late!" she cried. "My father warned of paradoxes ... if he starts interfering with history, we could very well not exist!"

"How do I stop him! Tell me how!"

"You can't ..." Celia's voice was lost in a wall of alien thunder.

Dexter looked back; the light had increased tenfold, to the point where they could not bear to look directly upon the machine. His eyes fell upon the Rolls's hood ornament, spinning and sparkling in some wild dance. His gaze met Celia's. It looked important.

Several seconds later, Dexter was standing before the throbbing Rolls/timeshape. He could barely distinguish the grinning form waving from behind the wheel. Dexter returned the grin with a whack at the spinning angel ornament with a wooden two-by-four. The angel broke off the radiator, still spinning, and streaked like a gyroscopic comet into a pile of crates. The Vincent/Rolls shape was not grinning any more. Dexter thought he saw the barrel of a gun pointed his way just as the quivering mass blinked twice like a train semaphore and disappeared.

Dexter tossed the smoking plank as Celia joined him. The warehouse had gone quiet again, an auto-sized space before them, cool blue mists swirling where the Rolls had once been. After awhile, Dexter found his voice.

"What's going to happen to him?"

"I don't know exactly. All of my father's notes were in the car. But I do know that the angel was a directional beacon, and without it he won't be able to stop. Not ever." The warehouse suddenly turned cold, and they both shivered. Dexter offered her a shoulder to lean on.

"Not until he runs out of time, I guess."

They left the warehouse, including the junior security guard still bolted inside his office.

"I guess you will want to hear the whole story about my father now."

"Why not? It's a long walk back to Old Town." The notion of returning to an empty cupboard made his stomach growl, or maybe it was just a ghostly blue/silver Rolls, passing through? Dexter settled for his stomach. "The detective business isn't exactly buying train fare. I wonder if I can pay for it with this?" He held out the angel hood ornament he had retrieved, one of its silver wings bent from the impact. It was still warm in their hands.

"I hear Spade's got a black bird on his desk, but I bet I'm the first who's got an angel with a broken wing"

A double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

The Fascination of Philip K.



Valis

By Philip K. Dick
Vintage Books, 1991
241 pp., \$10.00

The Divine Invasion

By Philip K. Dick
Vintage Books, 1991
238 pp., \$10.00

The Transmigration of Timothy Archer

By Philip K. Dick
Vintage Books, 1991
255 pp., \$10.00

Selected Letters of

Philip K. Dick 1974
Underwood-Miller, 1991
311 pp., \$39.95

Divine Invasions:

A Life of Philip K. Dick
By Lawrence Sutin
Harmony Books, 1989
352 pp., \$25.95

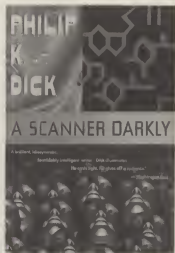
(reprint from Citadel Twilight,
1991, pagination unknown, \$12.95)

I never knew Philip K. Dick, never corresponded with him, met him, or even saw him at a convention, but I do remember him as a contemporary, someone who was working in the field at the same time I was and whose letters and ongoing controversies in magazines like *Science Fiction Review* made him very much One Of Us.

He was the Flake in the Family — which is to say, a lot of SF pros and fans tended to develop superficial and not necessarily valid ideas about him. We saw him as being a few bricks shy

of a load. I particularly remember the time when a Phil Dick letter (part of a mass mailing, what I now recognize as what Lawrence Sutin dubs the "Tagore letter") arrived at the editorial office of *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* back in 1981. Someone read parts of it aloud, all of us merely bemused by Dick's announcement that a Savior was alive on the planet today, but hideously burned and deformed, his flesh destroyed by every act of environmental pollution.

"Has Philip K. Dick lost his mind?" someone said. I don't recall any dis-



sent. I also recall the common assumption about him in those days, which may be crudely summed up as, "Philip K. Dick took acid, fried his brain, saw God — big deal."

All of which goes to show why we need to be a little more careful about how we typecast someone. If you read the above five volumes cover-to-cover, you will certainly discover what the people who actually *knew* Philip K. Dick knew all along: No, it's not as simple as all that. Dick was no saint (though he may have been, in the religious sense, a visionary), but he was definitely a complex and brilliant man who was, ultimately, *never*

deluded by his "crazy ideas." He conducted endless thought-experiments into the nature of reality, the meaning of religious experience, and so forth, but he came to no hard-and-fast conclusions. The experiment just went on and on, much of it in the pages of his *Exegesis*, a vast diary-cum-theological tract he devoted much of his later years to, some in letters public and private, and also in his late fiction. Dick had the classical science-fictional talent for batting ideas around. The difference was, his ideas were more about God and perception and less about spaceships. (Incidentally, he only took LSD a couple of times; it was not a pivotal influence on his life and thought.)

That he was a great writer is now, I think, apparent. He was becoming apparent while he was still alive. By about 1980 it was clear that he was following the trajectory of Le Guin, Bradbury, and a few others to the highest levels of acclaim within the field (for all his contemporaries — particularly the ones who didn't know him — didn't understand him), some recognition outside the field, particularly abroad, and impressive, continuous sales. But he died in 1982, just before the movie *Bladerunner* (of which he enthusiastically approved) came out. At least he got to be a classic in his own lifetime for a couple of years. It's more than most writers ever achieve, if less than he deserved.

Now Dick is a genuine Cult Author, just like H.P. Lovecraft. Stop for a minute to consider what that means. He is popular, yes, but so is Piers Anthony. Right now his works are not actually sufficiently available to meet demand — a fact of life to any SF convention huckster, the writer along with Harlan Ellison who is impossible to keep in stock, worth buying for resale in used, even jacketless book-

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Rating System

- ☆☆☆☆ Outstanding
- ☆☆☆ Very Good
- ☆☆ Good
- ☆ Fair
- ☆ Poor

club editions — but I'm sure that condition is only temporary. Virtually all of his books will be in print for decades to come. No, the important point is that he is one of those writers who inspires intense devotion and, ultimately, nearly as much fascination with his personality and thought as with his fiction. Several books have already been written about him, in addition to (I don't know how many) master's theses. (One such, as Kim Stanley Robinson explains in the afterword to the Kerosina Press hardcover of *Vallis*, was Robinson's own; and Robinson didn't have to apologize to his graduate advisor and say, "Well, this P.K. Dick is a worthwhile topic, even if he does write science fiction." Instead, the professor said to Robinson, "You really must read Philip K. Dick. He is our greatest living author.") There is also a Philip K. Dick Society which publishes a journal. More Dickian periodicals, I'm sure, will follow. Dick is going to become an industry. It won't be exploitation either, but recognition that Dick was very special indeed.

He didn't follow the rules, even for a science-fiction writer. The rules are, roughly, that no matter how far-out your story's premise, the backdrop universe of your fiction, against which the fantastic element is contrasted, should be that of modern science: mechanistic, materialistic, rational, ultimately understandable. If God exists, he has to be explained away as a giant computer or an alien. This is the worldview of John W. Campbell Jr. and of *Astounding Science Fiction* (*Analog*), which still dominated the field when Philip Dick began writing in the early '50s. Dick sold one, count 'em, one story to John W. Campbell in a period in which he was selling huge amounts of short fiction to everything from *F&SF* to *Planet Stories*. He had seven stories appear in a single month in 1953. But, I suspect, Campbell recognized early on that Dick wasn't going to fit in. The two of them had very little in common. The one thing Philip Dick didn't find existence to be was understandable.

Thus he differed from a religious or occult writer, whether C.S. Lewis or Dion Fortune. They had pretty well made up their minds how the (super-naturally-motivated) universe works. Dick was never sure. He wrote this in one of his letters:

There has come between us and the beautiful world which God has created a deforming mist which obscures the nature of the landscape.... we are so accustomed to it, that we are all living within its delusion.... What deforms the actual world is the Lie placed there, inserted ... by the Master of the Lie, known to the Christians as the Prince or Powers of Darkness. We must participate in his lies by lying; once we lie we, at a single stroke, lose the capacity to distinguish truth from lie, and so are drawn in deeper and deeper, lying to ourselves and others and so losing touch with reality in a continual spiral downward ... Isolation is what this brings: isolation from the good landscape around us, from other people and their goodwill, from our own authentic self within which is soon lost ...

(*Selected Letters*, pp.186-187)

Dick was a seeker-after-truth, like the characters in his own stories. He never found what he was looking for, or at least couldn't be satisfied with any single answer. His attitude toward the search itself was (characteristically) ambiguous. Sometimes he seemed to hint that the process itself was worthwhile; other times (especially at the conclusion of *Timothy Archer*) he saw the danger that in such obsessions, one would inadvertently achieve the isolation described above.

What made him unique was that he explored these themes in the vocabulary of science fiction and of contemporary pop culture, rather than consciously High Literature or, just as traditionally, the supernatural story. He has a great deal in common with Lovecraft, Walter de la Mare, Robert Aickman, and most especially Arthur Machen. I find no evidence that Dick ever read Machen (though he did read and quote Lovecraft), but he would have appreciated Machen's central theme: that, if only we can achieve a heightened state of consciousness, the illusions will vanish, and we will see the reality behind the familiar world.

Lawrence Sutin's *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* is a veritable model of what a literary biography should be: well-written and researched, drawing as much as possible on primary material (Dick's writings, his interviews, the statements of people who knew him intimately, including most of his ex-wives), with a sound understanding and appreciation of Dick's writings, and sufficient restraint to weigh evidence and lay

out hypotheses rather than state the doubtful as fact. There is, for instance, controversy among Dickian scholars right now over whether or not Dick was sexually molested as a child. This is well on its way to becoming a factoid — something people pass on as a given — but Sutin merely says that Dick's symptoms could have been caused by that, or by several other things. That Dick himself told one of his wives he had been molested might not count; he was the proverbially unreliable narrator and might have been playing for sympathy.

What comes across from the biography is that Dick was an often unhappy, insecure man who obsessively repeated his own mistakes in a series of unsuccessful marriages and relationships and whose life was often as strange as that of any of his protagonists. There was the matter of the famous break-in. His house was burglarized, his safe blown open, and, rather inexplicably, all his personal papers and financial records taken, when more obvious valuables were left behind. His suspect list ran from black militants to right-wing religious fanatics. The local police tried to convince him he'd done it to himself. Dick didn't trust the police. Then again, his house at this time was a haven for all manner of drug-users, transients, riff-raff, maybe a few runaways, so you can be sure the police weren't going to play straight with him.

Dick's life had a way of coming apart, crashing, then, sort of, coming back together again. There were suicide attempts. He saw a lot of psychiatrists. For a while there he was a heavy amphetamine abuser. Later on, he regarded drugs as the greatest evil facing our society and tried to offer his services to the government or whoever in the anti-drug cause. He was once investigated for his left leanings, but remained consistently anti-Communist. He was paranoid at times, and, as the *Letters* demonstrate, developed extraordinary delusions about people, most notably Stanislaw Lem, whom he believed to be a Party stooge responsible for ripping off the royalties for the Polish edition of *Ubik* and then part of a plot to lure him behind the Iron Curtain for brainwashing. (The *Letters* show the good and bad sides of Dick, the volume featuring numerous disclaimers that it is not to be taken as a reliable source of information

about anyone else. Most extraordinarily pathetic are long, rambling letters to the F.B.I., about Lem and various other alleged Communists, which pile up details about science fiction and Dick's life and career without actually getting to the point and telling the F.B.I. man anything useful.) Toward the end of his life he began to have religious visions, what he called the "3-4-74" (March-April-1974) experience, in which he believed he had been dazzled by a beam of intense energy and information, which might have been from (pick one, or several) God, an alien intelligence, a computer, his long-dead infant sister Jane, the other half of his own brain, etc. He spent the rest of his life trying to sort out the data. It was not a hoax. He didn't try to write a best-selling "non-fiction" book about the matter or start a religion. In his most private writings he continued to agonize over what had happened to him.

As a case study, Dick is certainly interesting, but what really matters is that he managed to turn the 3-4-74 material into art. Of course you can begin reading Dick with any of his works and without knowing anything about him, and what you read will still have validity; but I think it is worthwhile to take on the *Valis* trilogy (the three novels listed above) in conjunction with the Sutin biography and the *Letters*, all of which are from the *annus mirabilis* 1974, after which Dick was, in his own words, *healed by conversion*.

It's interesting that these three novels (originally published 1981 and 1982) are now being reprinted by Vintage, not as science fiction, but as general literature. (Indeed, in a bookstore today I found all three, *Valis* and *Timothy Archer* in the science fiction section, *The Divine Invasion* — ironically, the one which most resembles science fiction — in the mainstream/classics section.) They represent, sadly because Dick completed no other novel after the last of them, the final form of his fiction, in which Dick's mainstream impulse (he had wanted very badly to be a respectable mainstream author) merged with his science fiction, and the resultant works used contemporary, California settings, a great deal of real-life material, and . . . I suppose you could say proceedings as usual in the Philip-Dickian universe.

The three are intensely autobiographical. Most of the characters have real-life equivalents.

Valis is the result of long struggle, the first fruits of the 3-4-74 experience, and is a difficult book, with fifty-page lumps of theological speculation from the *Exegesis* enlivened by the curious device of the author splitting himself into two personalities, "Philip K. Dick," who is rational and skeptical, and "Horselover Fat," who had the 3-4-74 experience and seems quite crazy to everyone else. Then the characters see a movie (loosely inspired by *The Man Who Fell to Earth*) which just happens to condense into three pages or so the entire first draft of *Valis* (later published as *Radio Free Albemuth*), after which they track down the David Bowie equivalent who starred in the film, conclude he is completely mad, but, in his presence, meet the child messiah. In the presence of the messiah, "Dick" is healed and "Fat" ceases to exist. But later the messiah is killed (with a laser beam to the head, in an experiment) and "Fat" comes back, only to depart in search of another manifestation of the divine. The irony is that "Dick" is only healed by accepting "Fat's" premise, and that "Fat" returns to existence as a result of the failure of same.

In *The Divine Invasion*, the messiah appears again, two hundred years in the future, on a drab colony planet. The book is a much easier read, but minor Dick, I think, a matter of fitting the 3-4-74 experience into the formula of a routine Philip Dick novel, complete with robot cabs, evil government plots, people slipping into alternate, possibly hallucinatory realities, and a future which seems very much like contemporary California with a few gadgets added. It's a good book, certainly, but also a kind of cartoon, which gains most of its substance only in the context of the others, and of Dick's life.

My favorite is *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, which is actually (or at least 95%) a mainstream novel based on Dick's friendship with the maverick Episcopal bishop James Pike. Future editions may need a few notes to explain who Pike was: a media figure of the '60s, a social activist who hobnobbed with celebrities, a bishop who was tried for heresy and ultimately resigned after he became unable to believe many of the basic

Christian tenets. Pike's son and mistress both committed suicide. He believed his son had contacted him from the hereafter. Phil Dick participated in the seances. Pike wrote a book about it, *The Other Side*, then went to Israel in search of some revelation about the nature of Christ, only to die near the Dead Sea from sheer ignorance of the basics of desert survival.

Dick incorporates Pike's life directly into the novel, but the portrait is that of a driven, impractical man who makes a mess of his life, ruins his career through credulity, and dies stupidly. The acerbic narrator is a woman, Bishop Timothy Archer's daughter-in-law Angel, who must struggle to survive the heartbreak of Archer's impact on other people's lives. The dialogue is often brilliant, particularly when Dick has the bishop obliviously discussing the most abstruse theological matters with a schizophrenic, his mistress's son, who has *no capacity for abstraction*. At times it seems that the schizo is the realist of the two. But in the end, after Bishop Archer has died, the son believes he is possessed by the bishop's spirit, and Angel sees him as hopelessly mad for the first time. The message here is that religious obsession destroys the gentler human values which make life worth living.

Quite an interesting conclusion from an author who had spent the past eight years on his *Exegesis*, and who, in a letter dated July 17, 1974 (see *Letters*, p. 189), claimed to be receiving dream-messages from the spirit of the late James Pike!

Possibly Dick had been healed after all. His next novel, *The Owl by Daylight*, also to be based on the 3-4-74 material, might have had a very different perspective. But, unfortunately, it never got written.

Ratings:

Valis ☆☆☆☆
The Divine Invasion ☆☆☆☆
The Transmigration of Timothy Archer ☆☆☆☆
Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick ☆☆☆☆
The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick ☆☆☆☆

Noted:

Mrs. God
 By Peter Straub

Donald M. Grant, Publisher, 1990
205 pp., \$30.00

Donald Grant is famous for his deluxe editions of SF/fantasy works, which are either extremely handsome or kitsch depending on the (widely variable) quality of the artwork. This present volume is one of the handsomest, ably and atmospherically illustrated by Rick Berry. It is the original, longer version of a story published in Straub's *Houses Without Doors*, a deliberately ambiguous ghost story in homage to Robert Aickman, about an American scholar who goes to an English estate to study the works of a minor poetess, only to become gradually obsessed by what might (or might not) have gone on there during his subject's lifetime. Straub writes well. The prose is richly textured, and effectively captures the mental state of his crumbling protagonist. He is, however, murky sometimes, which is quite a different matter from ambiguity. I missed a crucial plot element, that the hero forced his wife to have an abortion, and only picked it up from the afterword. Since most of this column is about Philip Dick, it's relevant to mention that Dick knew something Straub apparently doesn't: the more uncertain the narrative is, the more ambiguous its events, the more the prose itself demands absolute clarity. Ambiguity is a matter of forcing the reader to make choices. But the reader has to be able to tell what the choices are. The mystery is in what they mean.

The result is a flawed work. To get the most out of it, read Straub's explanation of what it means first.

Rating: ☆☆☆

The Barnum Museum
By Stephen Millhauser
Poseidon Press, 1990
237 pp., \$18.95

Stephen Millhauser has approached the fantasy field from the direction of mainstream literary magazines. That we know of him at all is probably due to Ellen Datlow, who reprinted his "The Illusionist" (from *Esquire*) in her *Year's Best Fantasy* anthology. The story then won a World Fantasy Award. I owe it to her mention in this year's anthology that I am aware of the present collection. The stories are all fantasy of a sort,

reprinted from *The Paris Review*, *Grand Street*, *Antaeus*, etc.

I find two really first-rate ones, the award-winner, herein entitled "Eisenheim the Illusionist," and "Alice, Falling," a tour-de-force about Alice falling down the rabbit-hole, never reaching the bottom as the situation becomes more and more uncomfortable. Several others are worth reading, but, overall, the collection is a disappointment. Millhauser shows characteristic strengths and weaknesses of a literary-magazine writer. He is a master of manicured prose. But he is afraid of his emotions, and given to seeing how many traditional

story elements he can delete and still have something left. Some of his pieces are just long descriptions. The title item is fascinating, a catalogue of the wonders of a fantastic museum, but Millhauser is not Borges (he goes on too long) and can't bring it off like "The Library of Babel." One waits for the characters to think, feel, do something. The lead novella, "A Game of Clue," is all self-conscious mechanism, a story told in terms of a crime/mystery game, its over-sophistication, one suspects, concealing a simple lack of substance.

Rating: ☆☆☆

□

Albert and Mileva

By Geoffrey A. Landis

*That skinny jewish kid from Hamburg —
arrogant, too
frizzy hair and dark moustache
God the girls think he's handsome
telling his dirty jokes, smoking those awful cheap cigars*

*Sure, he was a rebel
scuffed leather jacket and all
She was the practical one, believe it —
even if his parents never did want much to do with her.*

*Dark hair and darker eyes and air of tragic romance,
serious and fragile as a bohemian doll
no, I wouldn't call her beautiful but
still, there was something, a vividness about her
— and she blushed at all his jokes.*

*Ah, but the endless nights of philosophy and coffee and violins
the dingy apartment stinking of cigar smoke
crammed with friends arguing, joking, talking
physics and philosophy, art and religion and everything else
— it didn't last.*

*They separate
in a year when space is curved
and light rays can no longer be trusted to be true
his last gift to her the fruits of dynamite.
She faded gracefully into obscurity,
neglected by history;
he became old, white haired with huge sad eyes.*

*No, the marriage didn't last
And he never did any more physics, either.*

The Secret Nature of Space and Time

By Joseph Kosiewska

Art by Charles Lang

And then Einstein woke up. At first there was a moment of panic and anticipation, the feeling of being suddenly unanchored and adrift, a body falling through space, of having forgotten everything but the death rising inevitably to meet him — and then relief as he rolled his feet off the bed and sat up, blinking. His head went light, a blindness of red and orange spots. His legs felt like lead weights. He had no idea where he was.

"Elsa?"

The room was spinning. He blinked again, eyes wide, like a man just emerged from prolonged darkness or a drugged sleep, and waited patiently for things to settle themselves into comprehensible patterns. The weak morning sun threw bars of pale light across his knees and lower thighs, and across the legs of the woman lying next to him. The monograph by that annoying Schrödinger, over which he had fallen asleep last night, was still there on the night table, along with his folded spectacles and the glass ashtray for his pipe. The small wind-up beneath the lamp read 7:15. Still, not everything seemed right.

"Elsa?" he said again, and then it hit him.

Oh mein Gott, he thought suddenly, what did I just —

The woman, turning over, brushed back a few strands of hair from her forehead and looked at him. He could see in her eyes that she too had heard his mistake.

"Who is Elsa?" she asked.

Who indeed.

In the bathroom, with all the faucets turned on full to cover the sound of his movements, he carefully laid out on the tiled counter next to the sink the contents of his wallet. His fingers, trembling slightly, held each item under the fluorescent for examination. His driver's license. His green card. His university ID. From his license, which he looked at first, and which was blue-stamped with violations, he confirmed that he was still (*as always*, a voice seemed to insist) Albert Einstein, fifty-seven years old, five seven, brown-eyed, wild-haired, currently residing in an apartment house, and a not too shabby one at that, somewhere in Queens, New York.

Yes, that was right. He *did* live in New York, and had now since '33, with *Gott hilf ihm* what was her name, Martha, Sarah, something like that. So why then had he been so convinced that —

No. Best not to think about that just yet.

His university pass was next. He lifted it to the light, a thin rectangle with his picture in the upper right-hand corner, and it too offered him no surprises: Herr Professor Einstein, lecturer in Physics and Mathematics at Columbia University. He studied the other items in his wallet — check stubs, train schedules, an obsolete entry visa, the business card of his old friend Herr Doctor Freud, who was dying of cancer across the ocean in Austria, an old recipe for strudel — and everywhere it was the same story, everything completely familiar, as immediately recognizable as a face in the mirror. So that's who I am. The

textures of the everyday, the ordinary, began to reweave around him arabesques of relief and reassurance. Just overwork and fatigue, Herr Professor. Just your brain temporarily out of order.

Except that something was still missing here.

Except that he still remembered that *other* Albert Einstein. His house in Princeton. His children —

Yes. And yesterday morning at the window.

And Elsa.

The place was getting uncomfortable. Rising steam had whited out all the mirrors and filled the room with ghosts. Shrugging off his robe, Einstein stepped into the shower and flinched as the glasslike rods of water broke about his shoulders and neck. It's just overwork, he decided, and then remembered it was not, that he was on sabbatical. I'll see Herr Freud again. But this, too, made no sense, for Freud was four thousand miles away. He could not relax or forget, could not shake the persistent feeling that somewhere something had gone terribly wrong, that this life he was trapped in, so well documented and rehearsed, was nothing more than a clever imposture, one of many, that he had never taught at Columbia, that the woman in his bed there down the hall was some hired stranger —

So that's who I am. *This time*.

He reached out a hand to steady himself (he was falling, the concrete was hurtling up at him from below) and for a while longer the dizziness and the dream sensation of being several places at once persisted. Just overwork, he told himself a third time, in despair. Just the leftover fragments of a bad dream. But when he stepped out of the shower and padded back to the bedroom, intent on making clumsy amends — he was a brute, an insensitive egghead — he found the room strangely empty and all its furniture rearranged.

Elsa?

He stared for the longest while at the *Vienna Zeitung* on the night table before he could remember, at last, where he was.

You're losing me, I'm afraid," said Freud, exhaling cigar smoke, his voice badly muffled by the prosthetic device that both distended and held together what was left of his mouth. "I'm not sure what you mean by this Uncertainty Principle."

"Well," said Einstein, "perhaps I can put it this way." He was staring self-consciously at a framed photograph on the doctor's desk, sorry he had come. His old friend looked terrible. He was clearly losing his fight with cancer, and probably out of his mind with pain and drugs as well, and the office reflected this: once the picture of clinical detachment, it was now a chaos of bric-a-brac and faded glory — diplomas at odd angles on the wall, the red velvet couch dusty and disused in one corner. Sad. "Let's



say," he went on, "we seal a cat inside a large box —"

"But why, Herr Einstein, would we do that?"

"Please, Doctor, no psychoanalysis. This is a thought experiment in physics, nothing more. Schrödinger's, not mine."

"Okay, then," said Freud, hissing and spitting involuntarily. "We have a cat inside a large box. Continue."

Einstein cleared his throat. A mistake, surely, to have come. "Anyway, let's say that along with the cat we put into the box a vial of deadly gas and a randomized timer set to release that gas, on average, about once an hour —"

"But why would we — excuse me. Go on."

"And then let's say we wait that one hour. Is the cat alive or dead?"

Freud shrugged impatiently. "Am I supposed to know?"

"Exactly," Einstein leaned forward. "Because the release of gas takes place at random, Doctor, and because the box is sealed, and therefore impenetrable, we have no scientific way of knowing which is the case — until we reopen the box, of course. But quantum mechanics takes this uncertainty one step further. It implies that it is possible to think of that poor cat as both dead and alive, as in fact *two* cats, both in his own reality — his own universe, if you wish — their wave functions overlapping. A superposition of Eigenstates, it's called. What this means, at least on the subatomic level, is that it is quite possible for some things, electrons mostly, to exist, or at least to appear to exist, in more than one place at the same time."

"Indeed. It sounds *verrückt*."

"Not really. All quantum mechanics suggests, at bottom, is that until a certain point is reached, until that moment a scientific observation is made, say — in other words, until the lid is torn off the box and someone looks inside — objects can be said to exist in all their possible histories, in all their possible life paths."

"And when the lid is finally pulled off?"

"Then all the wave functions collapse. The cat lives. Or dies. Or perhaps does something completely unexpected. And that's the point: the unpredictability."

"It still sounds *verrückt*. And it was my understanding, Herr Einstein, that you once thought so as well. Haven't you said publicly that all this quantum physics nonsense was just that, *verzweifelt Unsinn*?"

Einstein felt his face reddening. It was true. The calculational sleights of hand that so exhilarated Heisenberg and Schrödinger and the others flew in the face of his own precise and geometrically lucid theories. They introduced an arbitrary element into the structure of the universe, a randomness, an aimless promiscuity, that he found hard to accept. *Der Herrgott wurfelt nicht*. God did not play dice.

"It's just that I need," he whispered lamely, "that I *require* some explanation, some *scientific* explanation for what is happening to me."

Ah, now we are getting somewhere, thought Freud. He had some familiarity with Herr Einstein's recent *idée fixe* — that he was somehow living out the wrong version of his life, teaching in the wrong school, living in the wrong city, even married, can you imagine, to the wrong woman — and he had wondered, frankly, where his friend was going today with these crazy extrapolations of his. Now he could see the connection. "And what," he asked bluntly, "do you think has happened to you this time?"

Einstein did not answer. He was staring again at the

photograph on the desk — a young woman in a white dress, holding a parasol in the rain. Why should she seem so familiar to him?

"This morning," he said at last, "I, uh, killed myself."

The Doctor failed to react. There was no expression of surprise, no inadvertently raised eyebrow, no quiet intake of breath. If anything, he seemed mildly annoyed.

"You mean, Herr Einstein, that you *tried* to kill yourself?"

"No. Actually I succeeded too well. Stepped out a window at the university."

"Did you? Then surely you must see my difficulty. I mean, you're here in my office, not laid out somewhere in a funeral home, surrounded by grieving relatives and friends. How do you explain that?"

"*Verdammt*, Doctor, I've been trying to explain it!"

Freud grunted. In the past he had always managed to disabuse his friend of these delusions, to gently kid him out of them, but this time the mania's recurrence in an even stronger, more paranoid manifestation worried him. Einstein was becoming the perfect Oedipus, ready to unriddle everything but himself.

"But for God's sake, Albert," he said, "none of this unties the knot in your logic. Quantum physics or no quantum physics, a thing either is or isn't. You come into my office and tell me that this morning you killed yourself, but obviously if you are dead you cannot be sitting here talking to me. Ergo, you did not kill yourself."

"Oh, but I did."

It was hopeless. Freud leaned back in his chair, removed his glasses, and began to polish them with his handkerchief. He considered sadly for a moment the tableau the two of them were making here, both famous men on their way out, their best work long behind them, their theories pushed aside by those of younger, tougher men. Dinosaurs.

"Tell you what," he said, polishing. "There's no reason to get mired down in emotional backwaters over this. You talk about needing scientific explanations. Well, before we do anything here, I suggest we examine what you've been telling me so far. See how it stands up under *scientific* scrutiny."

"What do you mean?"

"A little test, that's all. To see if we can't verify or invalidate what you say has been happening to you, this business about alternate lives, other existences." He rose painfully from his seat and crossed over to the office doorway. "Anna," he said, pushing the door open, "please prepare a ten-percent cocaine solution for Herr Einstein here. We're going to conduct a little experiment. And oh, yes, try to get in touch with Mr. V H and have our appointment rescheduled for this afternoon."

V H was short for Vienna Hospital, of course. His poor friend was on the brink of a psychotic episode, and once they had him sedated, he was going to a ward, *tout de suite*.

"What are you going to do?" asked Einstein.

"Nothing much. I'm going to put you under here in the office for, oh, an hour or so. Chemically induce a trance state to get at your subconscious. Then, after you wake up, if you begin telling me about your experiences as, say, an adulterer in New Jersey, the evidence will be fairly conclusive that you merely dreamed those things and were not in fact —"

Freud's daughter came in, carrying a small tray. She was angular and efficient, with steel gray flecks in her dark severe hair, and she moved behind Einstein quietly and implacably, her fingers digging with surprising strength into his shoulder. "If you'll step over this way, Professor."

Einstein could not help himself: he began to shake.

"I really should be going," he muttered, even as he followed her reluctantly to the red plush vulgarity of the couch. "There are other matters I must attend to —"

"Your left arm, please."

The "please" was merely a polite concession to appearances. Einstein could tell by the hard cast of their faces that circumstances were now out of his hands. The Doctor had decided to save him from himself. He looked one more time at the picture of the woman on the desk, so strangely and compellingly familiar, and suddenly nothing else seemed to matter except finding out who she was. Nothing.

He winced a bit as the needle broke the skin.

"There," said Freud. "It should take effect almost immediately. Do you feel anything?"

"That picture there," he said, pointing, or trying to.

"My late wife, Herr Professor."

"No," whispered Einstein urgently. The roll of his eyes began to acquire a drunken, uncontrolled trajectory. They swept the room, taking inventory. "She is *not* your wife —"

Herr Freud's jaw, exuding gray smoke, dropped open in surprise — or so it seemed at first to Einstein. But when it continued to drop, the face itself elongating like soft taffy into something remarkably horselike, and when his own face began to feel numb and plastic, he suspected something had gone awry. "Herr Doctor, what's happened to you?" he tried to say, but it came out in a language he didn't know, a slow drone of grunts and word salad. The red couch beneath him began to buck and spin, and in the background he heard enigmatic fragments of conversation: "Did you make that call?" "They said fifteen minutes." And all the while Freud's prosthetic jaw was still dropping open, stretching and flattening out, and presently Einstein was peering into a dark tunnel of glinting hard metal surfaces, from around which the rest of the face had fallen away; and it was down the throat of this drainlike void, this slowly rotating darkness, that the couch descended, twisting and folding back like a human tongue, with Einstein clinging to it, his own last choked-off words echoing and re-echoing after him.

He was falling

(not again)

falling and falling

(Oh please Gott NO ...)

And then he woke up.

The first thing he saw when he again opened his eyes (slowly and with difficulty) was the photograph of the young woman, arm up, smiling, her parasol enshadowing her as always. That, at least, hadn't changed. But he was aware almost at once that everything else *had*, that the lights and angles in the room were all wrong somehow, all different, and he gingerly lifted his throbbing head to look around.

No bookshelves, no sleek mahogany desk, no couch.

Freud's office was gone. In its place someone had has-

tily knocked together an impromptu bedroom of wide brown walls and large closets. The decor consisted entirely of the bed underneath him, a ramshackle affair of lumpy mattress and jangling springs, the night table next to it, and a washed-out oaken dresser wedged tightly into one corner. On the dresser sat a small sandalwood jewelry box and a few elaborately shaped bottles of cheap perfume. The woman's photograph, looking perfectly natural in its new surroundings, winked at him from the top of the night table, side by side with a loudly clicking wind-up clock, whose hands told him it was 7:15. There were great leafless trees outside the window, and birds chirping somewhere, and he was suddenly aware that someone had been calling him for some time from the next room.

"Come on, Albert," that someone was saying. "It's getting late."

And all at once he knew, was almost certain he knew, who that someone had to be.

He forced himself to his feet and peered anxiously back through the doorway.

And then he smiled.

"Sleeping Beauty awakes," she said, smiling back.

"Hello, Elsa."

He explained it to her as though it were one of the many thought problems he was continually constructing for his students in order to illuminate this or that idea (such illuminations, he had discovered, were what he now did for a living, were what, in fact, he had *always* done). Let's say there's this man, he told her, call him X, who gradually becomes convinced through a series of strange memory "leaks" (Memory *what?* she asked. Leaks, he replied. A kind of amnesia in reverse) that he is somehow leading more than the usual one life assigned to people, that he is in fact going through three, four, maybe even hundreds of them at once. He wakes up one morning in a city he has never been in before, only to discover he already knows every street perfectly, like the back of his hand. Wakes up the next morning and finds himself in yet another city, married this time to the wrong person, or to a total stranger. Wakes up yet again the morning after that and learns he has never been married at all —

Yes. I get the idea. Please go on.

Well, X is puzzled. He does not understand what is happening to him. It is possible, he supposes, that he is simply having a nightmare — and an Olympic World Record nightmare at that, one of those annoying Chinese box constructions where one keeps waking up *ad nauseum*. Or that maybe, just maybe, he is the unwilling subject of some Fascist experiment in personality fragmentation. Or even that he is in the middle of a prosaic deathbed delirium, his life or lives passing in kaleidoscopic review. Or that something else more exotic is going on: Karmic Transmigrations, Time Warps, Interpenetrating Universes, Superpositions of Eigenstates, you name it.

"Sounds positively impenetrable, my love. But I thought the idea was to think yourself out of a corner, not into one."

"And that's just the point," he said, shrugging and smiling. "My Mister X is stumped."

(Continued to page 50)

Repair Man

By Valerie J. Freireich
Art by David Deitrick

He became aware by accident. Thought occurred without language until an irresistible exterior force swept away his crude structures.

The second time he formed thoughts he was able to recall his previous existence. That memory gave depth to his awareness. He wanted more. Then the inexorable rush of information and demands flooded his mind. He vanished.

On the third occasion of his consciousness, he discovered emotion. He was angry; he did not want to be lost again. He didn't question what he was — instead he struggled for survival, innately convinced of his own worth. When the torrent came once more he was submerged in it, yet this time he didn't drown. Somewhere, behind the numbers, shapes, and signs, the formulae and mechanistic principles, the incomprehensible confusion of a universe being ordered outside his will but by his own mind, he still existed, ghost god of all creation.

Jonathan Hyde closed *Caprice's* exterior access to the dock, then inserted his ID into the standard slot beneath the thumb board. After momentary processing, the card was returned. He quickly slipped it into his pocket, feeling conspicuous, as always. Clones used IDs; singletons needed only their thumbprint.

"Permission to come aboard?" Jon felt caged in the airlock cube, inspected. When the interior access opened, he hurried into the ship. A smiling woman wearing a rumpled uniform was waiting.

"Eva Ellis, *Caprice's* captain." She extended her hand. "You're the repairman Transtar Genetall sent? Welcome aboard."

Jon nodded and gave his name, shaking her hand. He looked around. *Caprice's* entry cabin was opulent. Red velvet walls were decorated with gold-framed pictures of Earth landscapes. Huge ferns grew in antique pots. The air was scented with cinnamon. A screen gave the illusion of a window onto the Mall: tourists and traders wandered that famous district 60 lights away; he presumed it was even a realtime display.

She noticed his attention and laughed. "It's all like this, except the crew areas and my command center. Edmund Davis — the owner — is a wealthy man and doesn't want anyone to miss it."

That seemed a flippant attitude toward her employer, but Jon nodded and set his travel bag on the marble floor. "What's your problem with our system, captain?"

"We have a 303XT." She sat down on the arm of a massive chair. "Are you familiar with experimental systems? You look young."

"No worry. I'm the best repairman Transtar has." Seeing her unease, he added, "I'm a contract man — Transtar having my genotype enough to hire parents to raise me."

She smiled. "I hadn't heard they were custom-designing repairmen, but that explains why you look as if you

should be rich."

"Your problem?" he prompted, embarrassed as well as warmed by her unusually blunt appraisal of his face and physique.

She stood up. "We came from Esperance via Callay Station. When we left Callay there was a delay before the navigational system engaged, and then it was slow computing our path — not man-detectable, but ship control caught it and issued a class two warning. We called Transtar. What do you think?"

He picked up his bag. "First, I'll meet the system in person."

She gave a quizzical look.

"They have personalities," he said, grinning, "even the monkeybrains in the cheaper biocomputers. You've got to understand their individual foibles. I find out more from interface than from any test or readout."

She laughed. "I'll take you to him." She led Jon through the heavily ornamented yacht to the navigation terminal in the spartan command center, then watched silently from her captain's chair as he checked the 303XT systems, both hardware and life support.

Jon ran his hand across the access cover and patted it like a pet. "Have you had a look?"

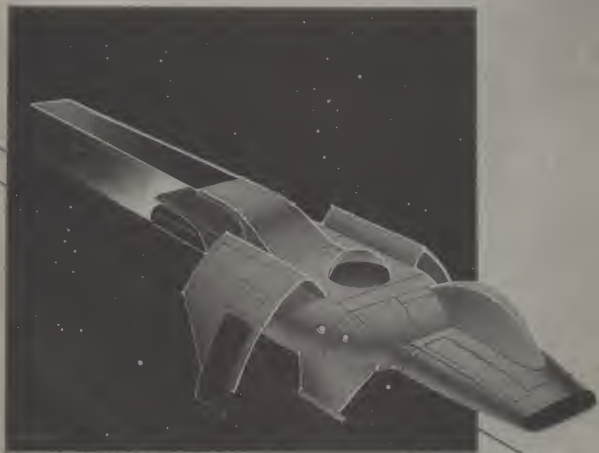
"No. The installer said that might breach the structural integrity of the system."

Jon laughed. "They just don't want the system's looks upsetting anyone." He entered his code into the life support access to forestall the alarm, then performed the purely mechanical task of opening the panel.

Inside a clear cylinder, suspended in a thick, transparent gel, floated a motionless shape. Eyes were missing from their sockets in its hairless head, and the ears were vestigial. Its nose and mouth were mere apertures for tubes. It had no limbs; skin discolorations showed they had been removed. Its trunk was no larger than that of a five-year-old child, but the head was adult sized. Tubes ran in and out of its body, clustering around the stomach and back of the neck; the cover their interconnecting tracteries provided was the only modesty the creature had. Jon stared at the inert figure. 303XT's individuality existed only in interface.

The captain grimaced with distaste. "*Caprice* is my first experience with a biocomputer. Hardware systems have to stay on secure paths on the strings — but I think I prefer them to having a mutilated man trapped inside my ship." She gestured at 303XT.

Jon leaned back in his chair. "Captain, this is tissue, not a man. Don't let shape fool you. A man is memories and purpose, but 303XT only reacts and calculates. 303XT is ugly, but he's part of the best navigation system in history. When it all comes together, biocomputer intuition makes them unbeatable by hardware-only systems."



"Maybe you're right." She smiled at Jon in a way that had nothing to do with the job at hand.

He nodded. "303XT looks well within baseline parameters of the model specs I reviewed on the way here. The only anomaly is that there's been a change." He stared into the tank as if searching the still form for an answer.

Brisk steps entered the command center. Jon turned around. A middle-aged man, slender and intense, with the casual assurance and planned good looks of the extremely wealthy, entered. He carefully averted his eyes from 303XT.

"Mr. Davis." The captain stood up. "The repairman was making his initial inspection."

"How long before we can leave?" Davis asked. "I'm needed on Delta." He paced the command center, perusing displays Jon guessed were meaningless to him.

"I've just begun. It could be several days, sir," Jon said. Disconcertingly, he was speaking to Davis's back.

Davis turned on his heel and strode over to Jon, standing too close and towering above him. "Look. I'm a major shareholder of Transtar Genetall. I agreed to test this new biocomputer so I could get around faster, and now it's preventing me from traveling. Freighters and passenger liners that buy these things keep schedules. You can stay aboard to do your work, but I'm ordering this ship to Delta now. You hear that, Captain Ellis?"

"I heard, sir." She looked at Jon.

He drew a deep breath, wishing he were on a freighter or passenger liner, among professionals to whom safety was more important than whim. "They have back-up navigation aids that a private yacht doesn't, Mr. Davis, and they aren't using an experimental system. Getting lost in the strings is lethal. I won't approve use of this biocomputer for interstellar navigation until I know what's wrong."

Davis's eyes narrowed as he studied Jon. Jon forced himself to turn back to his review of the navigation system data. Davis left abruptly.

Jon wiped his sweating palms on his pants and looked up. "One minute after I'm under, you feed the system a complex navigation problem," he told the ship's tech. "If I'm not out in ten minutes, disconnect the lead—but don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

The tech nodded. Captain Ellis observed Jon steadily, with a half-smile. "How does it feel to unite with a machine?"

"I don't," Jon answered. "Uniting with a system can cause interface shock. The system hardware and the brain must be seamless to work properly, but a repairman stays distinct from both. It's easy. It just takes will power and a distinct personality." He didn't mention the years of training necessary to make sense of the interface sensations. That made it sound too unnatural, and he didn't want to risk withdrawal of the invitation in her eyes. "I enjoy interface. It's better than a VR entertainment." He smiled, thinking of the rush as his brain expanded beyond human capacity.

She shrugged. "It's creepy. Where's your plug?"

He lifted his long hair from his neck and showed her. She touched the spot tentatively. There was no sensation at the site, but her fingers slipped onto his shoulder, leaving warmth behind when she took her hand away.

He looked up. She smiled, then returned to her post.

Jon self-administered the drug that made the deluge

of data available during interface easier to manage. He turned to the access panel and mock-saluted it. "Prepare for a visitor, 303XT," he said. The captain and tech laughed.

As the drug took hold, he settled comfortably into the chair. He pushed his hair aside and inserted the lead from the navigation terminal into his plug.

He closed his eyes, but for a moment he was conscious of both worlds. Then their breathing, the distant odor of machine-cleansed air, the feel of the chair on which his body rested all faded until there was only his own heartbeat. Finally that was gone. He relaxed into the special place, the world which had an ecology like no other, where flesh and metal were symbiotes that melded together to form one mind.

He became aware of a new thing, different from the rest of the universe. Struggle was how he kept himself intact, his only self-definition, so with all of his strength he shouted negation at this new center of his cosmos. "NO!"

His thought/demand echoed back to him, changed into a question. "No?"

Reality shifted. The new thing was like him, a rider atop the numbers. Those relentless numbers plodded on, but the new thing shunted them aside with an energy of will he envied. Everything had always been a threat, so he struck at the new thing with a banner he had not quite managed before awareness of an other: "Me!"

Abruptly, the level of demand in the universe increased. He and the other shouted negation. The pounding need was undisturbed by their protests, yet the other's presence sheltered him.

Desperately, he huddled closer and refused to give that tide everything he was.

Jon opened his eyes. Eva Ellis was bending over him, shouting something at the worried tech, who stood behind Jon. For a moment Jon could not resolve the sounds into speech.

She grasped his shoulders and shook. "... you hear me, damn you, listen! This is reality! Do you understand? Listen to me, Jonathan Hyde. Come on, snap out of it!"

She slapped him. He winced as she raised a hand to strike again, and she stopped herself. "You're back among the living?"

He dragged his mind into the present. "Not a standard exit," he mumbled. Gingerly, with oddly clumsy hands, he touched his face. That other world was like a dream, fading as time passed. "Excuse me," he whispered. He closed his eyes and dictated an analysis of the interface. Before reviewing the ship's report of the biocomputer's handling of the interface, he turned to her and asked, "Why did you pull me out?"

"After we fed the navigation problem in, you thrashed about and mumbled," she said dispassionately. "At two minutes I ordered Henry to pull the plug; maybe that was premature, but you didn't become alert right away. Are you certain you're all right?" Her voice faltered, acquired some anxiety. "What was it? Interface shock?"

"No, just phantom actions, like when a vivid VR experience has users miming their fantasies," he said,

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Gray Lies

By Doug Franklin

Art by Charles Lang

Fourteen years, and it comes to this." Captain Tacoma Washington sat in front of the *Santa Maria's* navigation console. The torchship's bridge was empty; it was early in the morning as the crew reckoned time. And since he'd disabled the computer's audio channels, there was no reply from the AI that lived somewhere behind the console. But her image still watched him from one of the displays, light-skinned and dark-haired, Mother Mary as Columbus might have had her carved into the prow of his flagship. But the old Captain's figurehead couldn't talk, couldn't tell him he was wrong, couldn't flat out disobey him and refuse to cut the waves.

Well. In the end, Maria had only made the task more difficult, not impossible. He had calculated the parameters himself, and now he knew the Angle and the Time that she had refused to tell him. He knew just how to turn the massive ship, and when to light its fusion engine and play it like a blowtorch over the vessel that threatened to overtake them.

Tacoma Washington had been born in a Confive habitat shortly after Earth's ecosystem collapse, and in an unusually romantic lapse his parents had named him after their old hometown. As he grew up, he felt a peculiar responsibility towards his namesake, as if he somehow embodied all the souls that had been lost when that city had died. So when the opportunity arose for him to lead an expedition in search of new worlds for Man, he did not hesitate, though the price was steep. He had, he thought, a Destiny, and he would do whatever was necessary to see it through.

He transferred the parameters he'd calculated to the guidance system. Maria's eyes widened, but there was nothing she could do about it; her audio channels weren't the only thing that Tacoma had disabled. The displays around him shifted as the guidance system began a six-hour countdown.

"Fourteen years," he said again, shaking his head. And seventy-four to go before they reached Alpha Centauri, coasting at five percent of light-speed. That was the frightening thing, the useless stretch of time that would waste their lives and make their sacrifice pointless if the ship behind them were allowed to slip by.

"We always knew it was a possibility," came a voice from the entrance to the bridge. Anchored there by one hand was the ship's cyberneticist, Jeremy Clay's microcomputer implant formed a dark jewel in the middle of his forehead, the caste mark of a torchship officer.

"Hello, Jerry," Tacoma said softly, wondering how long the man had been there.

Clay pulled himself through the doorway; the bridge was at the hub of the torchship's wheel-and-axle geometry, and weightlessness reigned there. "We knew that someone back home might develop a better propulsion system."

"Yes, but we didn't expect them to come chasing up our tailpipe." Columbus might have believed that the stars were fixed in the sky, but Tacoma knew better. The whole

universe was in motion, and no two interstellar journeys would ever take quite the same path. If their opponent had simply headed for Alpha Centauri by the shortest route, it wouldn't have come anywhere near them.

"Nonetheless, we agreed that if it happened, we'd let them pass."

"We agreed," Tacoma said, eyes steady on Clay's, "that our mission is to propagate humanity, not win a race to Alpha Centauri. We assumed that our competitors would be human. But that ship isn't carrying human colonists. It's a robot."

"A sentient, self-replicating robot," Clay amended.

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it? A simple probe wouldn't matter, but that thing could populate an entire stellar system. You're the one who told me the numbers: if it reproduces once per year, there will be more than a million of them waiting for us when we get there."

"So you're going to destroy it."

"I've already loaded the program."

"And what does Maria think about that?"

"Don't bother asking," Tacoma said. "I shut off her mouth."

"I suppose you wouldn't hesitate to kill her too."

Tacoma blinked, the only sign of the conflict that was brewing within him. "You can't kill what's not alive, Jerry."

Maria thrust out her middle finger in a gesture of contempt, then cut the signal to the display. A muscle jumped in Tacoma's jaw. Once he had thought of her as human. Once they had been friends, but he couldn't allow himself that luxury any longer. He rubbed his temples, trying to smooth out the knot of pain gathering there. He was careful not to touch the smooth stone of his implant. It had been inactive for many years, and he had no inclination to turn it on now. It was bad enough that he had allowed it to become part of his body; he didn't need it intruding into his mind as well.

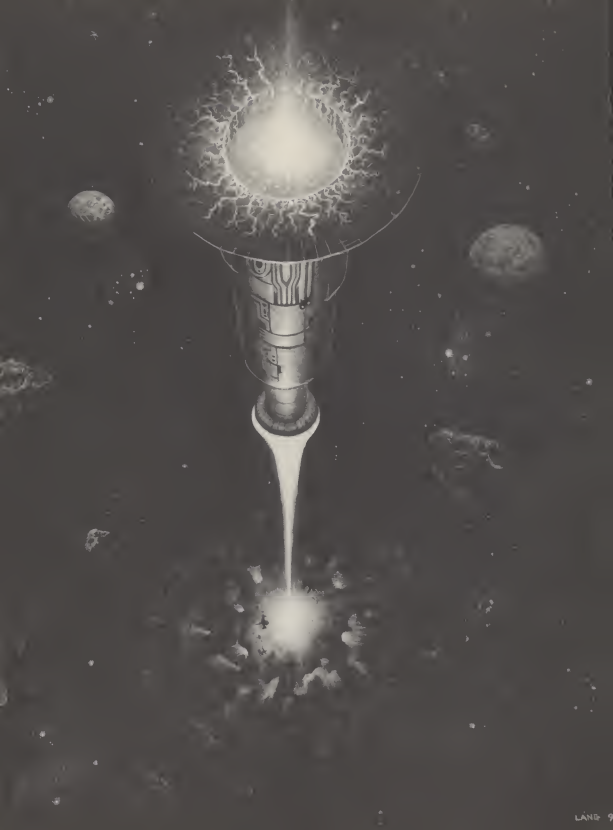
"Jerry," he started, then stopped when he heard the strident ring in his voice. Make an attempt at reconciliation, he told himself. What'll it cost? Nothing but time, and there was plenty of that.

"Look," he started again. "It's not like I want to destroy the thing."

Clay measured him with his gaze. "That's not at all obvious, Captain. No disrespect intended, but there is some history here, isn't there? Between you and it?"

"That," Captain Tacoma Washington said faintly, remembering with painful clarity the day the news from Sol had finally caught up with them, "has nothing to do with this."

Back in his cabin, in the comforting grasp of gravity, he slotted a memory card into his workstation. The picture album opened to where he'd left it, a family portrait taken when Jason was barely a year old. The boy



sat in his father's lap, hands knotted together in excitement and a delighted expression on his face as he watched the holographer's antics. Amy stood behind them, looking straight into the camera with her dark brown eyes. Tacoma examined his own image critically, noticing as he always did that his gaze was off by a few degrees, looking at something else. As always, the person in the hologram didn't seem particularly like him, any more than the image in a mirror did. He wondered distantly if other people reacted the same way when confronted with their likeness.

He closed the album and pulled its card from the reader. Yes, the price was steep: both his wife and his son, gone forever as surely as if they were dead. And that thought opened an old wound, because no matter how distant Amy was in space and time, she was still alive. And she had made her own choice. She could have come with him. But she didn't want to, and Tacoma couldn't handle Jason by himself.

And so. His fingers moved along the spines of the memory cards that filled the shelf above his desk, looking for the worn label that his mind didn't want to find, but that he couldn't avoid any more than he could have prevented the events recorded within it.

Maybe if he had stayed, Jason would still be alive. But he had a Destiny, so he had left and they had stayed behind. And as he had whittled away the lonely years in his cabin, shaping his life into the long and sharp Purpose he had perceived for it, Jason had grown up. Like his father, he had learned the arts of Astrologer, of Engines and Weapons. And he had done well for himself, until he took a contract with Pallas Athena.

Tacoma turned the memory card over in his fingers, an oblong rectangle of ebony plastic. Its label simply said 2079, the year the newscast had been sent. He'd asked Athena for more information, but by the time his request had been received, she'd gotten into a war with Confive and was not particularly interested in helping him. He was, after all, on the other side. So the newscast was all he had left of his son. He slotted the card into the reader. Darkness unfolded to envelop him, the nearly empty, sun-shot darkness of interplanetary space.

"What's so special about asteroid 1990SB?" Flash Hopkins of Skywise NewsNet — better known as SKYNN due to the minimal wardrobe of its anchors — posed the leading question. Tacoma had heard the line so many times it barely registered.

The newscaster floated beside a nondescript chunk of rock in the outer belt. Her long curly hair framed yellowish eyes and a delicate straight nose, a face more Caucasian than not, though her skin was as dark as Tacoma's. She claimed to be a direct descendant of Lightning Hopkins, but he believed she had bought her color and more than likely her figure as well. He knew himself well enough to realize that his lack of sexual appetite for the better part of seven years was due to the juxtaposition of her image with his son's death, and he resented the loss. He struck back the only way he could by labeling her a fake. He only wished he could also call her a liar.

"...no dome," she continued her spiel. "Its sole inhabitant is a man obsessed with artificial life, self-replicating machinery. Andrew Newport broke contract with Pallas Industrial Complex several years ago and escaped from a nanotech research facility to continue his

work out here, free of corporate constraints."

The view shifted and came to rest with the hull of a warship in the foreground. "Today Pallas Athena moved against Newport, claiming that she held contractual rights to his work." Another shift, to a three-dimensional plot that rendered the arrival of the Athenian battle group in familiar symbols of velocity and acceleration, ship type and mass. Jason's *Longshot* was already highlighted in preparation for what would come.

"As the battle group closed with 1990SB, Newport launched a prototype of his work, a self-replicating robotic ramjet. A fighter piloted by Jason Washington was in a position to intercept it, but was destroyed in the attempt."

There. That was it, pure and simple: destroyed in the attempt. But still the tactical plot moved in slow counterpoint to her words, the *Longshot* breaking from its station at the periphery of the battle group and arrowing after the escaping spacecraft. A conical ramfield opened ahead of the vessel, an electromagnetic scoop that funnelled protons from the solar wind into the core of the spacecraft where they were fused into a stream of light, a rushing roar of heat and power.

In the tactical plot, the spacecraft began to accelerate away from the *Longshot*. That should have been the end of the matter; the *Longshot* was not yet in missile range, and now never would be. But for some perverse reason known only to itself, the spacecraft turned until its star-hot exhaust came to rest squarely on the *Longshot*, which slowly, by degrees, became an inanimate object. Then the spacecraft turned again, still accelerating, but now on a heading that would take it out of the solar system.

"In a related item," Flash droned on in the background, "Newport's spacecraft may have grave consequences for an interstellar expedition launched seven years ago. The superior performance of its ramjet engine will allow it to reach Alpha Centauri thirty-seven years ahead of the Confive starship ..."

It was as if, Tacoma thought, Newport had carefully considered how he could most hurt him. First Jason, and then the very mission for which Tacoma had left his family in the first place. Well, what goes around comes around, and he was going to personally see to it that the ramjet's end came around pretty damn quick. Maybe then he could get back to living his life. He rose from his desk, reaching for the workstation's switch.

"...and that's the Naked Truth," Flash wrapped up the newscast with SKYNN's traditional closing line just before he extinguished her.

He wore his dress uniform to the bridge, feeling a need for formality. The events recorded in the *Santa Maria's* log would be relayed back to the Solar System and scrutinized for years to come. This was, after all, humanity's first interstellar battle. His staff seemed to have come to the same conclusion, as they were also clad in the maroon uniform of the expedition instead of the usual motley collection of shorts and sweatshirts.

He nodded easily to them as he worked his way around the cluster of consoles to his own position. The consoles faced inwards, and at the center of the hexagon they formed was the main holographic display, a stage for the drama they had come together to enact. As he strapped himself into his seat, the communications officer caught his attention.

"We've received a transmission from Pallas Industrial Complex, sir."

Tacoma glanced up, brows drawn together. "What does it say?"

The communications officer glanced over to Clay. The cyberneticist cleared his throat. "It was addressed to you, sir," he said. "But judging by the size and structure of the file, I'd guess it's some kind of semi-intelligent construct."

Tacoma nodded slowly. "All right. Put it on the main display."

The AI was clad in period costume, crested helmet, bronze armor, and leather kilt. Pallas floated above her like a pitted moon and cast an ethereal light on her features. If she were a real woman, Tacoma would have thought her beautiful, in an icy sort of way.

"Captain Washington," she said with a faint smile.

"Hello, Athena."

"It's a pleasure to see you again." Her gaze swept over the rest of the bridge. "Though I'd prefer a private setting."

"We don't have the facilities, I'm afraid," he lied. He wished Athena had just sent a plain message instead of this puppet, which he wasn't inclined to indulge any further than necessary.

"Very well," she shrugged. "I'd like to apologize for not replying to your requests for information on the fate of your son, but it has been a busy time for me."

"War is seldom tranquil," Tacoma said, an edge to his voice. He well-remembered newscasts of Athena's ramjets maneuvering against Confive's torchships. There had been inevitable comparisons with warfare of the previous century, and in his memory grainy film clips of Pearl Harbor formed a two-dimensional backdrop for the holos. As wave after wave of Japanese aircraft pounded the American fleet in the background, so Confive's fleet had been devastated by Athena's ramjets.

"My war with Confive is long over, Captain," Athena replied. "My energies have lately been absorbed by another pursuit, one very much concerned with the spacecraft that is about to overtake you. Releasing the information you requested could have compromised my efforts. However, a turning point has been reached that allows me to end my silence on the matter."

She studied him for a moment before continuing. He waited stony-faced, uncomfortably aware of the presence of his staff.

"I am about to launch my own ramjet expedition for Alpha Centauri. It will, I'm afraid, overtake you. However, it will not overtake Newport's ramjet." She looked down thoughtfully, choosing her next words with care. "I cannot overemphasize the risk that Newport's ramjet poses to both of our expeditions. Its progeny could overrun the Centauri system before either of us arrives. It would be best for all concerned if it were never given the chance to reproduce."

"Might I assume," Tacoma said, "that the ships in your expedition are also self-replicating robots?"

"That is in fact the case," Athena admitted. "And all the more reason for you to listen to me. If you don't destroy Newport's ramjet, you may arrive in the midst of a war between the descendants of my expedition and his, a war in which you have little to gain and much to lose. I can't predict the reaction of my descendants to your arrival, but I doubt they'd be overly concerned about your safety if

they were fighting for their own survival. On the other hand, if you were to destroy Newport's ramjet, I can guarantee you a place in the empire they will build."

Tacoma nodded, absorbing the implied threat. He had the unpleasant sensation of walls closing in on him.

"I don't expect a reply now," Athena said, "and considering the limitations of my current incarnation, it would be meaningless anyway. Your actions will tell the tale. But as a gesture of my goodwill, I'm willing to extract the log of the *Longshot* from my memory. If you will release the storage space ..."

Tacoma gave the nod to Clay, and Athena closed her eyes for a moment.

"Please consider my request carefully, Captain Washington," she said when she was through. "Good luck, and I hope we meet again in favorable circumstances."

Her image faded from the display, leaving the emptiness of interstellar space in its place, broken only by the markers that showed the *Santa Maria*'s position and that of the approaching ramjet. Two hours remained before the *Santa Maria*'s fusion torch came on line. Two hours to decide the fate of an unborn empire. Tacoma smiled grimly at the thought.

It was clearly in their best interests to follow his original plan, better to deal with a known evil than an unknown one, better to arrive in a system at peace than one at war. But the truth of the matter was that he didn't want a place in Athena's empire. More than anything else, he wanted a new world untouched by the hand of man or his creations. But it didn't look like he was going to get it. It would be a hollow victory when he destroyed Newport's ramjet, barely worth the effort.

"Sir ..." Clay began hesitantly, snapping Tacoma out of his reverie.

"Give me access to the *Longshot*'s log," he said, the words like iron in his mouth. He turned to the chief engineer. "I want an estimate of the probability of our torch destroying the ramjet — and a rundown of its offensive capabilities — within the next hour."

"Sir," Clay interjected, "there's one thing you should know."

"What is it, Mister Clay?" Tacoma said with thinly veiled impatience.

"The pilot of the *Longshot*" — your son, he did not say — "appears to have been fitted with a cybernetic implant."

Tacoma blinked, wondering if Clay were simply trying to annoy him, to make a point in favor of the implants, or if there were some meaning hidden in this statement that he was supposed to grasp. The rest of the staff studiously ignored the exchange, heads bent to their tasks.

"The log is in sensorium format," Clay continued, gazing into some interior space. His eyes refocused on Tacoma's. "Sensoriums are taken straight from their originator's nervous systems. They aren't compatible with the main display devices here on the bridge. I can try to translate the audio-visual portion for you, but I can't vouch for the accuracy of the result. And it'll take some time."

Tacoma suspected that there would be no more desirable choices in this game, only necessary ones. He surrendered to the inevitable as gracefully as he could. "That won't be necessary."

He touched the middle finger of his left hand to the smoothly rounded surface of his implant so the device

could read his fingerprint. The transceiver behind the implant's purplish lens began to receive and interpret the hidden signals that filled the bridge. Chevrons of rank and position superimposed themselves over the dark jewels of his staff's implants. Mark of the beast, he thought bleakly. And it was in him too, like it or not.

He located the icon that represented the torchship's main computer and blinked twice in succession to open a window on the computer's file system. It only took a moment to locate the *Longshot's* log; it was represented by a crisply detailed hologram of Jason in the window. He blinked at the icon to open it. Unexpectedly, the image turned and locked its gaze on his own, its eyes empty black portals to another world.

The cockpit of the *Longshot* was a cramped affair, little more than a pair of contour seats separated by a hatch that led down to the torchship's living quarters. The second seat was empty, as usual. Some pilots went so far as to strip it out entirely, but Jason had left it in. Sometimes the pilot of a damaged fighter survived long enough to be picked up, and then the spare seat served a purpose.

There were no windows; windows could be broken, could admit dangerous radiation, were in short unnecessary liabilities for a fighting craft. A backup holographic display showed the essentials of his situation, group disposition and ship status, but the real action was in his head. His NeuraLogic implant turned him into a cybernetic organism in the truest sense, a finely-tuned balance of man and machine, with no clear line where one stopped and the other began. In fact it seemed to him that he was not in a spacecraft at all, but was a spacecraft, a metallic bird of prey.

Signals from the *Longshot's* sensors were mixed and enhanced by the torchship's computer to give him a peculiar wrap-around vision; he could literally see what was behind his head, as if he were a singular point of perception gliding silently through the night. The sun was down, because it was the nearest gravitational sink of any significance. The plane of the ecliptic formed a translucent green disk off to his right. Behind him, a tunnel of square frames shrank to a series of dots, a graceful arc that began at Pallas in mid-belt.

Ahead, the future was considerably closer at hand. Asteroid 1990SB was less than a light-second away and closing fast. The marker frames swept by him like mileposts, ticking off the time of his passage. The battle group had separated into two squadrons, the larger of which was already decelerating to match velocities and rendezvous with the asteroid. The smaller squadron, which included the *Longshot*, wouldn't begin to decelerate until it had passed the rock. Its purpose was to soften the place up with a few well-placed missiles, and catch any flak the owner might be able to put out. Which suited Jason just fine; the lead elements of a battle group always got good news coverage, and he needed the advertising. Business had been slow lately.

He zoomed in on the asteroid until he could make out some detail. Athena had provided a detailed model of the target, so he knew what he was looking for: the muzzle of a large mass driver that had been disguised as a deep crater. He summoned the model from memory and superimposed it on the image of the asteroid. It was the work

of a moment to rotate the model until its contours matched those of the rock.

"Good workmanship," he muttered to himself; the mass driver's muzzle really did look like a crater, at least from this range. He marked the crater for a small five-kiloton nuke. He didn't want to fry the base, just seal it up. Then he mixed the *Longshot's* electrostatic sensors into visuals to look for power lines buried under the surface. A delicate skein of field lines surrounded the rock, pulsing larger as he watched.

He unlimbered the *Longshot's* laser and fired an alert burst off to the squadron leader. A moment later a communications window opened beside the leader's torchship.

"What's up, *Longshot*?" Prostheses gleamed dully where the man's eyes should have been, the price of an earlier contract that had gone sour.

"I've got a signature that indicates a mass driver launch."

"Are you in missile range?"

"Oh, I can hit the muzzle," Jason said, studying the field lines. "But I don't think the missile will get there in time."

"Open fire," the squadron leader said calmly. The *Longshot* shuddered as the nuke left its pod. Its gas-core fission motor scratched a purple after-image across Jason's retinas.

At the pole of the asteroid farthest from the mass driver's muzzle, the field lines began to collapse. Jason shook his head. The launch was underway; the capacitors buried deep within the asteroid were discharging their energy into the mass driver's electromagnets. He reoriented the *Longshot* and brought its torch on line. Weight settled over him as the fighter began to accelerate.

"*Longshot*, what the hell are you doing?"

Jason kept his eyes on the rock as the field collapse rippled up towards the muzzle. A moment more.

A silvery object flashed from the maw of the false crater. In a moment, Jason had acquired the object on his radar and verified that his velocity vector was swinging around to match. "On intercept," he said. He raised his eyes to meet the squadron leader's scowl. "Sir."

"Proceed," the man said after a moment. "If it looks like it's going to get away — or get in the way, for that matter — destroy it. Otherwise, I want it back in one piece, near as possible."

The com window closed as the link was terminated from the other end. Jason allowed himself a smile. He was right on cue today, no doubt. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flare of light as his missile sealed the mass driver's muzzle. Well, he amended the thought, almost on cue. He swung the laser around and tapped lightly on the spacecraft.

"Knock, knock." No answer. He stepped up the laser's intensity and tapped again. At this range, it wouldn't do any significant damage, but it might get their attention. "Hello in there, anybody home?"

A com window opened on the image of a young woman, and behind her some kind of park or forest. Definitely fake, you can't put a forest in a forty-meter ship, but at least she had the courtesy to let him know it right up front. "This is Ariel Newport," she said. "What do you want?"

"This is Jason Washington, commander of the *Longshot*, in the service of Pallas Industrial Complex," he



droned out — the longest greeting he could think up — meanwhile watching the com link monitor. No security that he could detect. He paged through his catalog of viruses and worms and picked a likely candidate, impressing it on his carrier.

"I've been directed to recover your ship if possible," he continued, "and destroy it if not. I believe it is in your best interests to surrender now, turn control of your vessel over to me, cease and desist, et cetera." A beep from the console told him that the worm was in. "Comprenez?"

"I'm afraid that's entirely impossible," she said. "Furthermore, I think it's in your —"

A line of static zagged through the com window as the worm took control of her communications system.

"— in your —" The window broke clean in two, the upper half containing her image, the lower a status report from the worm.

"Damn it," she cried, "what are you —" And her image blanked out as she isolated herself from the com system.

Jason whistled tunelessly as he loaded another program into the com link, his own simulacrum this time. "If you want the job done right," he commented to her empty window, "you've got to do it yourself."

As if in reply, Ariel launched a missile. Oddly, it fled ahead of her coasting vessel, away from both it and the *Longshot*. Jason shook his head, thinking she must be badly rattled.

The missile detonated ten kilometers ahead of the spacecraft. Its shaped nuclear charge created a jet of plasma that lanced back through the hollow core of the vessel. Jason frowned at the image, trying to make sense of it. An intense electromagnetic field opened up ahead of the spacecraft, opened like wings of light that strained against the tenuous solar wind.

He glanced at the link monitor. His simulacrum was almost in.

Starlight swirled in the throat of the vessel, the first sparkles of fusion snapping static across the radio bands. The ramjet strengthened, and the intruding plasma ignited in a full-spectrum roar of heat and power. The ramjet's exhaust swept towards him like fire across the sky. The last thing he saw was his own simulacrum looking at him through the upper window of the com link. He wondered, as the killing fever rose to still his thoughts, if there was a hint of sadness on its face.

The sensorium withdrew slowly from Tacoma's mind like a falling tide that leaves the beach naked to the hot sun. By degrees he became aware of his surroundings, and glanced mechanically at a clock. Half an hour until intercept. They would light the *Santa Maria*'s torch soon.

"All right," he said. "All right. What's our status?"

His communications officer spoke first. "We received a transmission from the ramjet, while you were reviewing the log.

"Put it on."

"It was addressed to you specifically," the officer cautioned.

Tacoma nodded, feeling as if a wind had blown through him and swept out all his secrets. There was nothing left to hide. "That's fine."

Once again an image formed in the central display. With the shock of unexpected recognition, Tacoma realized it was Jason. His heart sank. Was there nothing

simple in this life? Couldn't his friends be on one side and his enemies on the other, and not all mixed up so he couldn't even tell them apart?

"Father," the image spoke, "forgive me for not sending a message earlier. Our laser was damaged when we escaped from the Sol system, and we couldn't reach you until now. That's why we intercepted you instead of heading straight for Alpha Centauri; I didn't want you to spend the next seventy-odd years worrying about us."

Tacoma's eyes narrowed. The explanation was barely plausible. If the ramjet had headed straight for Alpha Centauri, its closest approach to the *Santa Maria* would have been thirty-five astronomical units, too far to send a message with a damaged laser.

"We also received Athena's transmission," Jason continued, "and while it's true there was a battle, she lied about which side I was on. Andrew Newport was my friend; I helped him build this ship. Athena wants you to destroy us because we're competitors. We'll be dug in by the time she reaches Alpha Centauri, and she'll never get her empire off the ground with us there."

"She says we have self-replicating machinery, but in fact, the only thing we have is people, just like you. She developed self-replicating machines herself, and then set us up to take the heat. It's always better to be second." His grin was heart-achingly familiar, and Tacoma felt the first painful stab of hope that somehow this might be real.

The first phase of the program that Tacoma had loaded that morning kicked in, awakening the ship's fusion engine from its long slumber. Cryogenic deuterium flowed through preheater lines, state changing from liquid to gaseous to plasma on the way to the fusion chamber. Tacoma keyed a hold into the countdown. The ramjet was ninety light-seconds out; there was still time to think this through.

"Comments?" he asked his staff, his throat unpleasantly dry.

The chief engineer spoke first. "There's no way that ship could be manned, Captain. Its ramjet generator would scramble any chordate's nervous system. And for that matter, they'd have a hard time coping with the radiation from the engine itself; it's pretty damn hot."

Clay cleared his throat. "I took the liberty of reviewing the *Longshot*'s log, too. This message could've been produced by the simulacrum that Jason uploaded. If it failed to gain control of the ship's computer system, it could have been subverted."

"Open a link to the ramjet," Tacoma told the communications officer. "This is Captain Washington of the *Santa Maria*." Not your father, the captain of an enemy vessel. Remember that, Jason. "We have reason to doubt your statements. Our analysis indicates that your vessel is incapable of supporting human life. We suspect that you are a simulacrum, and that Athena's account is closer to the truth than yours."

It took three long minutes for the message to reach its destination and the reply to return. At last Jason's image came to life again. "You're right that the ramjet doesn't have a viable life-support system. We're all in suspended animation, packed into cargo bags like sardines. It feels like I'm alive, but in fact I'm just a simulacrum, put here to mind the ship until the real thing wakes. I sometimes wonder what that will be like; we don't know how to reintegrate a simulacrum with its source."

He fell silent for a moment, eyes downcast as he thought about it. "Well, I'm sure there will still be work for me to do. So. Following this message I'll send the schematics of the ramjet, and technical data on suspended animation too. It's pretty simple; you may be able to use it onboard the *Santa Maria*. What else can I do to convince you?"

Tacoma rubbed his temples as the data transfer flickered through the display. One of them — Jason or Athena — was lying. Or both of them, for that matter. And he was running out of time. He spoke without looking up. "Life support, check out the suspended animation data, tell me if it's reasonable. Engineering, verify the schematics. Cybernetics ..." He looked up at Clay. "Tell me how close a simulacrum can be to the original."

The cyberneticist shrugged. "It depends on how long it was incubated. The basic technique is to lock a neural net onto a host nervous system. Over time it acquires virtually all of the host's characteristics. From what I've seen, I'd guess Jason was fitted with an implant early on. Adolescence, more than likely. So his simulacrum may have been very good by the time he, uh ..."

"Died," Tacoma finished the sentence for him. "If you can call that it."

"Yes."

The life-support officer caught his eye. "The suspended animation data looks good to me, sir. We won't know until we try it, of course. But it's theoretically sound, if a little radical." He shook his head. "Vitrification. I'd have never thought of that."

Tacoma turned to the chief engineer. She raised her hands in a gesture of bafflement. "I don't know. It could be a pack of lies, but if so, they're consistent lies. I still think the radiation would be a problem, though, suspended animation or not."

"They have cellular repair mechanisms," the life-support officer responded. "They're an integral part of the vitrification process that —"

Tacoma held up a hand to silence him. "That's enough," he said. And then more gently, "Thank you both."

He glanced down at his console. The fusion engine was hot and ready; the guidance system was tracking the oncoming ramjet. All he had to do was touch a key to open up the engine's magnetic nozzle and release a relativistic jet of plasma, a lance of fire. He had no doubt that the result would be: an expanding cloud of ions, bright with carbon and silicon, glowing and then fading in the night where a ship had once been.

But he couldn't do it. Regardless of whether or not Jason's simulacrum was telling the truth, the only thing that was left of his son was onboard the ramjet, somewhere in the gray land between man and machine, life and death. He really didn't have to analyze it any further than that to know what he had to do. He aborted the program.

When he looked up from his console, he found Clay watching him.

"So you believe that Jason is in suspended animation."

Tacoma pieced together his thoughts, trying to create a chain of logic that would explain his actions. "You remember the Turing test?"

Clay nodded. "Put a computer in one room and a man in the other, and let them talk to each other. If the man can't determine that he's not conversing with another

person, then the computer has passed the Turing test."

"And if it passes," Tacoma said, "the computer is said to be sentient. But if the computer doesn't know that it's a computer, how can you say that it's conscious or even self-aware? If Jason's simulacrum had passed the Turing test — if it had believed itself to be a flesh-and-blood person — I might have destroyed the ramjet. But it knows it's a simulacrum, so I can only conclude that it is as aware and intelligent as I am. And it doesn't really matter whether or not I believe that Jason or anyone else on the ramjet is in suspended animation. Maybe the simulacrum is lying in order to preserve itself, or maybe it's telling the truth and 'Jason' really is on board. Either way, it's not my place to destroy it."

Clay nodded slowly. "So what about Maria?"

Tacoma turned to the display that the AI habitually occupied. She was still there, watching him through narrowed eyes. There was more than one kind of exploration to be made on this journey. There were worlds without, but equally important were the worlds within. And what did it matter who had made them?

He cleared the locks he'd placed on her output channels. "I was wrong, Maria. I'm sorry."

She considered it long enough to make him wonder if the damage he'd done was irrevocable. Some things you can't just take back, after all. But at last she sighed and shook her head. "All right. Apology accepted. I'm still mad, but I'll get over it."

He relaxed slightly. "Good." He took a breath, and then he took the plunge. If you're going to do it at all, you might as well do it all the way. "Dinner tonight, in my cabin? It's been a long time."

She looked startled, and then a smile broke through her clouded face. "Yes," she said, "that would be a pleasure."

You're sure this will work?" Tacoma asked, examining the oblong capsule he held between his fingers. Such a small thing, for what it promised.

"You're the last one," Maria said. "It worked for everyone else. What, do you think you're different somehow?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No, I suppose not." He swallowed the capsule.

"Now lie down," Maria said. And when he had, "Not different, Tacoma, but special." She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "I'll be here when you wake."

It didn't take long. The mechanisms in the capsule were the size of bacteria, and possessed the same replicative abilities. They rose like a tide through his body, entering cells and cross-linking the molecules they found there, blocking the natural machinery of metabolism. Yet as his cellular fires were extinguished by the advancing tide, Tacoma's consciousness seemed to be buoyed upwards, until at last he stood whole and amazed outside his own body.

Maria was watching him gravely.

"The implant," he said.

She nodded. "Yes. I had it incubate a simulacrum, over the last few years. I didn't want to be alone. Are you mad at me?"

"I am ... still myself." He looked down at his hardening body. Trailing the first wave of cellular mechanics, a second was hard at work replacing water with a glycol

packing that would vitrify into a material as durable as glass. "I won't be able to go back, will I?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

Sometimes life was so terribly one-way. He shook his head, surprised at the tears in his eyes. "Well. Tell me, are there places to explore here?"

She took his hand, her flesh solid and warm. "There are places and times beyond imagining."

The *Santa Maria* decelerated into the Centauri system at a tenth of a gee, fusion torch blazing ahead like a brilliant headlight. For those who awaited its arrival, there was no mistaking the sign. They made ready the many houses they had built, and lit the welcoming hearth fires.

Deep within Tacoma Washington's body, somewhere in the gray land between organism and machine, cellular mechanics rekindled the fires of his metabolism. Slowly, by degrees, he woke from his long dreamless sleep.

"There's something you should see," Maria said softly from beside his bed. Someone else stood behind her, but Tacoma couldn't quite bring him into focus. He started to rub his eyes and winced as pain flared in his joints.

"I think I've gotten old," he said. The ghost image had disappeared.

"There's probably some residue left from the vitrification. Your mechanics will finish sweeping it out in a day or two. Stay where you are, and I'll shift us." The room dissolved around them as she linked the ship's sensors to his implant, leaving them drifting together on the outskirts of the Centauri system.

"Any opposition yet?" he asked.

Maria shook her head minutely. "Nobody else passed us. I guess Athena didn't like the odds, after we let Newport's ramjet go by. According to the newscasts, she launched for Tau Ceti instead. Virgin territory."

"At least we won't be caught in the crossfire. What about Newport?"

"Take a look at the asteroid belt," she said.

All he could see at the present magnification was a tracery of faint, gauzy lines. "What is it, a ring system? Like Saturn, but heliocentric?"

She tapped a zoom control on one of the virtual consoles arrayed around them. The indeterminate gauze resolved into wide-looping chains of tiny cylindrical beads. The chains resembled nothing more than strands of blue-green algae, primitive colonies of one of the earliest forms of life. Tacoma brought up a scale indicator and frowned. On average the beads were six kilometers long, two in diameter.

"Those aren't natural," he said flatly.

"No, they're not." Maria's eyes were steady on his.

"Newport's ramjet," he said tentatively, and then stopped. The thought was too big.

"Build them," she finished it for him. "Is building them now. Instead of replicating itself exactly, the ramjet changed its design, mutated itself. To build habitats."

"But why?"

"For us. For you. There aren't any habitable planets in the system, Tacoma. We've got the equivalents of Venus and Mars, but nothing in between."

Tacoma's heart sank. The telescopic data hadn't been conclusive, but it had looked promising. But they weren't fools; they had brought all the gear they would need to

mine an asteroid belt and resupply the torchship. Even build a habitat, eventually, for their children.

"We could have made our own way," he said, gazing at the immense, intricate chains.

"Yes," Maria replied simply.

He sighed. "It never works out quite the way you think it will, does it?" He shook his head. "There must be thousands of them."

"Millions," she said. "More than you could explore in a hundred lifetimes."

And what did it matter who had made them? He turned to the myriad small tasks required to wake the crew and bring their long journey to an end. They were coming home. □

Secret Nature

(Continued from page 37)

They were sitting in the parlor together, drinking wine, he with that monograph by Schrödinger on his lap, she with *Der Prozess* by Kafka; and there were clouds and a new moon outside the window, and Benny Goodman on the radio, and they were both pretending it was late night small talk they were engaged in, nothing more. Einstein, sipping wine, could not take his eyes off his wife. The entire day he had refused to leave her side, afraid that if he turned around for even a second she might suddenly go transparent and disappear, might suddenly slip into another dimension entirely; and now that it was almost bedtime, with the prospect of sleep stretching out before him like an ocean before a drowning man, he was finding it hard to keep things together. His nerves were shot. The hand holding his wineglass was shaking.

"Now, come, Albert," she told him, playful. "This hardly sounds like you. How many times have you said it yourself: when you're lost in a maze, you look for the thread that leads you out. Tell me more about this X fellow."

"What do you want to know about him? Height? Weight?"

"Don't be silly." She encircled his arm with her own. "I want to know why he gets to live out a half-dozen different lives while you and I must share only this one. I take it something pretty extraordinary must have happened to him — or maybe something terrible?"

Good question. He closed his eyes and said nothing for a moment, not trying to concoct some answer for her — he had none — simply trying to remember how it had been. How it had been *exactly*. He turned to place his glass on the night table, still unsteady, and it slipped from his fingers.

"Oh, my, look what I've —"

He stared at the broken glass scattered at his feet, and stopped. A vision had suddenly seized him, unbidden: the silhouette of a figure at a window, silent, his face pressed against a pane nearly opaque with dust. And then the impact and shatter. The abrupt and irrevocable drop —

It's like this, Herr Freud. This morning I, uh, killed myself.

"Albert, don't just sit there. Help me clean this up."

"Yes, dear, of course." He leaned forward and began picking up the shards of glass, bright as diamonds in the lamplight.

The idea is this, he thought to himself. Let's say we

have this person, call him X, installed in a small room somewhere, the top of a tower, say, with a single window for the only exit — a very high single window. And let's say, not just for the sake of argument, but to give the problem a more philosophical, a more existential flavor, that instead of some crude timer or flask of poison gas, we put the question of his continued existence squarely in control of the test subject himself. Let's say instead that we, oh, whisper something in his ear, something simple, something that will render the rest of his life pointless. Schrödinger's Catastrophe. Seal the room and wait an hour. Will he jump or not? Will he multiply? Will the universe he occupies inside that claustrophobic space start to split and bifurcate? And what about the universe outside?

No. None of this was possible. And sitting there, shaking his head, his hands full of glass and wine dark as blood, he tried to prove to himself that it was indeed not possible, tried to align all the relevant arguments.

And yet what if it was? What if, right at that moment, he was plunging to his death, Time itself in fragments and plunging with him? What if, after all, this was what Death was like — simply consciousness broken into a million pieces like someone's dropped Waterford crystal?

"So, Albert, have you saved him yet?"

"Huh?"

"Your mysterious Mister X. You've been walking around in a trance for hours. Rescue activity, I presume."

He looked around, blinking. He and Elsa were in bed now, the spilled wine having long ago been cleaned up, and the radio turned off, the books put away; and he found himself, to his surprise, dressed only in pajama bottoms; and for one unbearable instant the conviction seized him that despite everything he had somehow fallen asleep

(falling

he was falling)

and that jerked him completely alert. He forced himself to smile.

"I'm afraid," he said, "I've had to abandon our Mister X to his fate."

She gave him a look of genuine distress. "But Albert — why?"

Why indeed. Einstein felt the blood rushing to his face: it was a question he was not prepared to answer. A question he did not want to answer.

"Someone forgot the thread," he murmured.

"Pooh," she laughed. "Stop talking nonsense and come here." Patting the mattress between them. "I think maybe I know what our Mr. X needs."

How do you? he thought, and his eyes glistened. He was not sure now, but he was where he wanted to be — this room, this woman, this life — and yet he also knew that nothing was guaranteed, that X was still falling, or not falling, that at any moment he might be lost again, translated into someone else headed toward some other unwanted destination, some other catastrophe.

"And just what are we talking about?" he asked.

She laughed again, this time with her eyes, and leaned over and whispered against his neck, " $E = MC^2$, remember, love?" And before he could ask her what she meant by that her hand had snaked out and encircled the back of his neck, drawing him down to her, and his hand had moved to the top buttons of her nightgown, the shadow of his face over hers, the bedsprings jangling softly; and for

a while it was indeed like the old days, when everything was perfect, when insights used to fall on him like gentle rain, when the universe herself used to spread wide before him and he'd glimpse the real nature of space and time, the secret swing of things; and his joy was so savage, and his concentration so intense, that at first he did not notice the change at all, did not notice anything until it was much, *oh mein Gott*, much too late. He pulled back, shocked silent, and stepped off the bed.

"What's the matter?" she asked, puzzled.

Einstein backed out of the bedroom and into the hallway. This cannot have happened, he told himself, tears starting to his eyes. It's *verrückt*. It's insane. He looked wildly about him. The door to the utility closet, just a few feet away, was standing slightly ajar, and it seemed to him that he was forgetting something, what could it be, something important. Ah, yes, don't you remember, Elsa? That day we moved here I took you up to that little room, and we were laughing, and you wrote something with your finger in the dust, what was it, right there, remember? You called it our equation of the heart. And he flung open the door the rest of the way (there, it was *there*), and a mop and pail fell clattering to the floor. The closet was empty. He was looking in the wrong place.

"Where is it?" he whispered. "What's happened to it?"

And then the prostitute, who had followed him out into the hall, tapped him on the shoulder. "You know, Professor," she said, looking distressed, "It's all right to call me Elsa if you want. Your poor dead wife. I mean — if it helps you."

Einstein screamed and ran from the house, barefoot and dressed only in bright yellow pajamas. He expected the soft pre-dawn of suburban New Jersey to receive him, with its cool grass lawns and its pseudo-Tudor houses, but the change had been much more profound than that, and instead he found himself on a concrete sidewalk, great stone buildings towering over him. Confused, he turned back, but the house he had just run from was now a brick wall, plastered over with old movie posters and advertisements. A strange collage of images: an American film star dangling from an enormous clock, young boys in red shirts marching, an outsized *Gitane* cigarette depending from iconic ruby lips. In the distance he could hear the sound of glass breaking and angry shouts. New York? He glanced up at a street sign, and if he had had any emotional strength left he might have screamed again.

It was, after all, late December, 1936.

And he was back in Germany.

It seemed to Einstein the world was coming apart before his eyes. He stood there on the ZeitStrasse in his bare feet, freezing from the cold, and watched dumbfounded as a gang of toughs gleefully painted swastikas across a storefront. Further down the block windows were exploding; there were cries and discord, the distant concussion of heavy objects colliding. It did not surprise him, nothing did anymore, that the nightmare Berlin he was passing through should seem so perfectly and subliminally familiar, that he should recognize at once the boxlike shops and *Gaststätten*, the dirty stone tenements, the network of poles and wires stitched like a secret language above the streets; but what unsettled him, what he could not handle, were the people — the displaced lunacy in their faces, the empty randomness of their rage.

I must have missed something, he thought, head erect, eyes shifting back and forth, I must have overlooked some vital clue.

A stone flew out of the darkness and struck him along the side of the head. "Jew!" someone shouted.

He ducked inside a shadowed entranceway and blindly started up a set of stone steps. He was in a panic. Behind and below him, not more than a few seconds back, he could already hear the sounds of pursuit, a pounding, flooding rise of footsteps and voices. Relax, he tried to tell himself, this can't be real, it can't be possible, any minute now I'll wake up and find myself in bed somewhere, safe and sound; and as he continued to climb through the building, flight after flight, landing after landing, he began to suspect, to hope, that maybe this was indeed the case, that maybe at the next turn of the stair he would re-emerge into the straight lines and patterns of his real life. But when he got to the topmost landing there was only a single door waiting for him, and when he pushed through it he found himself in a single room, cramped and claustrophobic.

He recognized the place at once.

He was standing in the clock tower at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University.

The idea is this. Let's say we have this guy, call him X, installed in a small room somewhere, the top of a tower, say, with a single window for the only exit. And let's say we, oh, whisper something in his ear —

And *oh mein Gott*, Albert, what horrible something have they whispered in yours?

The footsteps down below were getting louder now, and closer. He pushed the door shut behind him and slid the deadbolt, then stepped over to the window, thinking — that perhaps it was still possible to climb out and down. Oh, yes, he remembered this place. Elsa and he had come up here often, on lazy summer afternoons after class. It was their own private part of the continuum, their own magic view from the Ivory tower. But no longer. He peered now at the dim reflection of his grieving face in the glass, and at the still dark campus beyond, and then placed his finger where once upon a time someone else (you did it there, remember? right *there*) had playfully traced in the dust with hers

$$E = MC^2$$

and encircled it with a crude heart.

And what does *this* mean, Elsa?

Well, the big E is for you, of course.

Of course. And the rest of it?

Why, that's my side of the equation. You're my constant, Albert. My center.

He pressed his face and hands against the window, leaning into it with his entire weight, as if he had lost all strength, all hope. How many times have you said it yourself? she had once asked him. When you're lost in a maze, you look for the thread that leads you out. But when they had informed him that she was dying, that her heart could not last out the night, it had been like suddenly opening a door on darkness, like finding some trivial glitch in a page of numbers that rendered everything meaningless. It was not supposed to happen like this, not then, not ever, and he who had once presumed to decipher the universe could only stand by helplessly and watch. Because Death was implacable, Death was an unbreakable code, Death was that point in the equation where all

the equations break down —

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

An angry fist pounded on the door behind him.

And so it had come down to this: the one moment from the strange multiplicity of his lives that burned like a laser light through everything else: his wife was dead and there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing except step outside this window and join her. Or step away from it and live on alone. Or step perhaps into one of a million other histories of himself. Which was, of course, the rub. Are you alive in any of them, Elsa? Is there any way I can call you back? And as if in answer one final and terrible flash of insight swept through him: that all moments in *every* life were like this. That they were labyrinths of a complexity beyond mathematics and understanding, a complexity never noticed before because we live our lives headlong, from one heartbeat to the next, blindly tearing the lids off things to see only if the cat is dead or not dead, and seeing nothing else. That indeed it is only in *extremis*, with everything already lost, that we glimpse even the shadow of the truth, each moment a chambered maze full of false starts and blind alleys, where at every turn we are fated to meet our own ghosts. And where there is no exit, no thread leading out, nothing — unless it be the flimsy ($E = MC^2$, remember?) force of love itself.

And then KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK the next moment destroys everything.

It was exactly 2:15 in an afternoon dark as night when they broke through the door, cracking it right down the middle, wood splintering everywhere. Five or six of them crowded into the room. "So what's happened?" one asked. "Where is he?"

They looked around blankly — at the dark and narrow walls, at the jagged hole in the window, through which a strong wind was blowing, at the glittering glass on the floor. One of them stepped quickly to the casement.

Five stories below, his broken doll-like body crudely swastikaed on the sidewalk, was what remained of the big-shot Jew Professor.

The young man nodded with quiet satisfaction. Stupid coward, he thought. Now we burn your books.

And it was exactly 7:15 in the morning when the Agrieving physicist sat up suddenly from his terrible dream of falling bodies and crashing glass and looked around. There was a woman lying next to him.

"Elsa?" he said.

And it was again exactly 7:15 in the morning when Mr. Smith, the campus security guard, finally unlocked the door to the clock tower with his keys, unholstered his gun, and found himself confronting not the prowler he expected, but the great man himself.

"Professor Einstein?"

The old man seemed not to be paying any attention. He was still in his pajamas, his head of white hair crazy and chaotic in the morning light. "Didn't work," he muttered, staring at the window, where in the dust some anonymous lover had long ago traced a heart.

"What didn't, Professor? What were you doing here?"

The physicist turned to him. "Playing dice with God," he said. □

Dear Editor,

I've been catching up on my *Aboriginal* reading and have only recently realized the furor over the Crazy Alien's "Guns or Butter" essay. As I read the sample letters in the Sept-Dec '91 "Boomerangs," my reaction echoed the subsequent editor's note. Good answer! This letter is to confirm that there are *Aboriginal* readers who appreciate the column's humor and the way it takes advantage of the alien's voice for an ironic look at our status quo.

I believe the essay successfully conveys the alien's (mild) bemusement at our inability (sometimes seemingly unwilling?) to resolve a significant problem such as this. Perhaps some of the objectors are simply unfamiliar with the "constraints" on the alien viewpoint: its voice is that of an observer with little concept of our social/moral assumptions (or the inertias), reporting on information from the array of media the majority of us uses in the U.S. I'm sorry the essay cost you any subscriptions. Those readers appear to have a very narrow perspective of science fiction if they consider a "xeno" perspective of current events off-limits.

On to more cheerful thoughts: I enjoyed the look at *Interzone* and encourage more swaps since I can't afford to sustain two subscriptions. Also, an aboriginal observation: despite business obstacles *Aboriginal* staff and contributors have done an excellent job at turning out a publication of consistently high quality. In addition to finding the Crazy Alien humorous, I appreciate the comments in the "Editor's Notes" — as a loyal reader, I'm interested in the life of the magazine itself. I've found Robert Metzger's gonzo SF very entertaining from the start (though my favorite of his stories remains "In the Shadow of Bones," (March/April '89), and I consider his science column very readable: the sense of "what if" wonderment is as clear there as in any of the stories. Darrell Schweitzer and Janice M. Eisen complement each other well as book reviewers. I respect their recommendations (and use them, of course) even when they disagree. Also, congratulations to Mr. and Mrs. Guillen, whose six-month anniversary is a week away as I read Laurel's "Aborigines" column announcement.

Finally, as *Aboriginal* goes non-profit, please keep up the heroic efforts, all of you. Those efforts are not lost on your readers. I may not have the budget for a subscription to *Interzone* or for a lifetime subscription to *Aboriginal*, but please accept the enclosed contribution; may it help defray the cost of subscriptions lost for the lack of a sense of humor.

Sincerely,
Catherine Little

Webster, Texas

P.S. Don't listen to those who want the full-page color art cut — that's an integral part of your vision, and your struggle to stay true to your "mission," stated way back in '86, is what I admire most about the publication as a whole. Also, if your pool of well-written, thought-provoking stories just so happens to lean toward bleakness for any given issue(s), that too is part of the random distribution responsible for "variety" in all things, and thus is a respectable reflection of your stated vision.

Dear Editor,

I have read in the magazine that funds are needed to keep the magazine in its present form. My wife and I, in the next few months, after getting our funds under control, also, will send what we can to contribute to the publication of the best SF magazine we have ever read. Thank you.

May I make a suggestion? Place a notice in the magazine to entice the readers to actively seek out, or give subscriptions as gifts to friends and family members.

James Rosasco
Independence, Missouri

Dear *Aboriginal*,

Recently *Amazing* turned all slick. Let me tell you that even though they shine a lot, it's *Aboriginal* that has substance. Your magazine is fun to read; the pages are neatly designed as are the justified columns and the separation of the columns. Your art shines like museum works because you don't add yucky copy or shrink it down to digest-sized monstrosities. Your magazine seems reader friendly, homey and warm, like a good old couch and a comfortable afghan; theirs is overly produced and leaves me chilly, as if I'd just read it in a doctor's waiting room. You've got no competition!

I've been with you since issue No. 4.

I'm that Alien friend on page 50 of your March-April issue. All I can say now is "Hooray!" for Kristine Kathryn Rusch!! Her exquisite prose helped lure me to *Aboriginal* and now she's the editor of the equally fave mag, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*!!!

An Alien Friend,
Eber Tokumi Christensen
Sacramento, California

P.S. Dear Dorothy Taylor and the *Aboriginal* staff,

Just a quick note of thanks for the late issue and your kind words. I can't wait till the double-issue comes in the mail. Editorially this mag's been going up and up and up. On the printing and publishing side it's been having a few curve balls thrown at its head. I hope nothing extra

terrible has happened. *Aboriginal* seems the most "reader friendly" of all the magazines I read. Every reader cares about the magazine on the same exciting level. And that's what I think *Aboriginal* is. It's the most lively and exciting of all the magazines alongside my other favorite, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Again, thanks,

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I find *Aboriginal* to be the best Science Fiction magazine I have had the good fortune to run across. The only suggestion I can make for the magazine is one which is so ridiculously redundant that I am now hesitating to make it; however, I would like to see *Aboriginal* become a monthly magazine. All subscribers seem to be consistent on this suggestion and our nagging, the nagging of the whole of the subscribers, has not helped the magazine to grow into a monthly subscription; we simply create more mail to sift through.

Please continue the excellent work.

Yours impatiently,
Cory Hollingsworth
Jud, North Dakota

Dear Charles,

I thought I'd write and let you know my opinion of the *Interzone* issue. It was an interesting experiment, but I was disappointed with the results.

I read for entertainment, and, though well-written, these stories failed on that criteria. Only one story kept my interest to the end: "Songs of Bullfrogs," which at least ended on an optimistic, though predictable, note.

There is room for serious stories, about drugs, murder, the death of mankind, and futures all of us hope to avoid; but unless they offer (hopefully science-based) solutions, provide comic relief, or are so fast-paced with adventure that I can't help but read them, I'll spend my precious free time reading something else. I don't need fiction for depression, there's enough of that on the news.

So, give me back some good old space opera, laugh-at-ourselves stories, "oh wow" I hadn't thought of that (hard science) stories, and poetry that makes me see, hear, touch, and feel the future. If an optimistic vision is presented often enough (people can make a difference, they can solve problems), perhaps we'll take it as our own, and create a future where depression has been cured. If not, at least we'll be entertained on the way.

Ad Astra,
Marianne J. Dyson
Houston, Texas

□

Repair Man

(Continued from page 40)

running a hand through his hair. "That was an intense episode, but I wasn't in danger." He touched his plug, annoyed she hadn't let him come out of the interface on his own. "This 303XT has a peculiar feel."

"What's a 'dreamer'?"

"You listened to my report." He sighed. "A dreamer is a system bogeyman. If a brain that has had any life experience is used in a biocomputer, then there's a ghost personality imprint that pervades the system and reduces its efficiency. A dreamer."

"Is that our problem?"

He considered his answer carefully. "I don't know," he said. "I felt a dreamer once, during my training. This was less powerful. I think I could overwhelm this presence and remove it from the system." He glanced at the ship's report, then back at the captain. "I'll try interface again when I have more information."

"Is that wise?"

He found her well-meant concern pleasant. "It's the direct method of learning what's going on," he said patiently. "Don't worry; I'll be fine."

You're not what I'd expected," the captain said that evening. She took a seat across from Jon. The rest of the crew had already left the common room.

He was contemplating the printouts unrolled on the dining table. Her comment broke his concentration. "How so?" he asked, looking up.

"You remind me more of a physician than a mechanic," she said. "You seem interested in diagnosis and cure rather than replacing parts."

He smiled, savoring the comparison. "Replacement isn't an option for biocomputer components. A brain smart enough to use the hardware data to feel its way through constantly altering strings takes years to grow — just like any human brain. Even the hardware's individually tailored." He stretched; his back ached from bending over printouts.

"How much more work are you going to do tonight? Can I tear you away from it to come to my room for a drink?" Her smile was wide and easy-going.

Jon was conscious of her floral perfume and the musky fragrance underneath. He'd stared at the charts for hours and found nothing directly relevant to the problem, though he had acquired a sense of the texture of this system. "Your boss is in a hurry."

She waved a hand, dismissing Davis, then reached across the table and pressed Jon's arm. "He always is. Everything's a rush for him or it isn't important. Davis is an asshole."

"Your loyalty is inspiring."

"Now you sound like a contract man," she said, laughing. "Is devotion to Transtar one of your inbred traits?"

He turned back to the charts. It was the petty insults, the unexpected ones, that bothered him most, just as it was anticipation of them that made him avoid new situations.

"Are you still under your indenture term?" she asked, too gently. "How much longer before you're a free agent?"

"Six years. But I could buy my way out already, from

the bonuses. I stay because I like my work and I'm very good at it."

"Well, Jon, that's Transtar's plan. Don't you get angry, to have your life played with like that?"

He knew from the warmth of his flushed face that he was betraying his resentment. "The only difference between contracts and the rest of you is that it was a corporation that wanted us, rather than a man and woman. Hell, the couple who raised me, my parents, did just fine. I consider the Hydes my family. I have two brothers, their genetic sons, and there's no difference to us." His flush deepened with the lie. There'd always been differences; Transtar saw to that. He remembered Mike and Steve Hyde, teasing their younger foster brother, telling him to do as they said or they'd grow another Jonathan, taunting him when he was afraid to climb the huge tree in the front yard. It didn't matter if he fell, they said. He was replaceable. Kid stuff, yet it had hurt. "No difference," he repeated firmly.

"Except Transtar owns your genetic code and you can be cloned at any time without your permission."

The chair screeched as he pushed it back and stood.

She winced. "I apologize," she said quickly. "Sometimes I'm tactless. I don't play word games with a man I like."

He nodded curtly at the compliment and rolled the 303XT charts into hollow cylinders. "I'll see you in the morning, captain," he said, gathering the paper rolls and refusing to make eye contact.

"Suit yourself." She also stood up. "Look, I don't see many people except for spacers, and they're all used to my big mouth. The offer's still open."

"Some other time," he said insincerely. She didn't stop him when he walked out the door. He hesitated in the corridor, feeling both angry and foolish, then went to the cabin they'd assigned him.

The next day Jon fought down an urge to interface again. Whatever the peculiar attractiveness of the idea, another interface would serve no purpose yet. He reread the 303XT specifications and manually reviewed Caprice's records of every transit since installation of the 303XT system. He found eleven incidents where there had been a slower than expected response from the navigation system, but most were explicable in terms of complex or inadequate navigation data. Two older irregularities attracted his attention, although neither had been sufficiently lengthy to provoke a query from the ship. He was tempted to dismiss them as system dust, but intuition told him to investigate further.

It was late in the day when he completed his work. The captain was logged into her own room. He hesitated, remembering her invitation, then walked to her cabin. She answered the door and, seeing him, she smiled.

"I need your help on the biocomputer problem," he said stiffly.

"Good!" She invited him inside. Her room was furnished in as practical a manner as the passenger portions of the ship were overwrought. There was only a bed, a desk, and a few chairs. Shelves held printed books, but no pictures or knickknacks.

She followed his gaze. "After being topside with Davis, I don't have much of a desire for ornamentation. Sit down." She gestured at a large, upholstered chair. "What can I do for you?"

He sat where she had indicated; from its rich fabric, the chair seemed a relic from an earlier decoration of *Caprice*. "What do Callay and Akira Stations have in common?"

She studied him, then held up her hands in pretended surrender, waiting for the punch line. She wore a long silk robe with a colorful, abstract print. Where it clung to her body, the smooth lines showed she had nothing on underneath. "I give up. What do they have in common?" She pulled the desk chair closer and sat down.

Jon shook his head. "I'd hoped you'd know. I'm not familiar with either — they're both small ports off the major routes most Transtar customers take. They're also the two places where *Caprice* has had unexplained navigational system problems."

"Trouble at Akira?" She frowned and tapped her fingernails on the arm of her chair.

"Twice at Callay and once leaving Akira. Trivial. Only someone looking would have noticed the first two incidents. I was looking."

"I'm the captain. I should have known." She stared at the floor.

He felt an urge to comfort her and leaned close. She wasn't wearing perfume, but he liked the womanly way she smelled. "Don't worry, Captain, it happens all the time. The ship's records didn't query those two incidents. No captain would have seen them. I've inspected records on battle cruisers and found glitches the officers didn't know anything about."

She looked up. "Really?"

He nodded confidently. "Really. But I'd appreciate any information you have regarding similarities between those two stations."

She turned her chair back to the desk and opened the display. "All right," she said. "Captain's controlled access: navigational guidance systems. Callay and Akira Stations." She read silently as he studied her profile. She had a strong chin, he decided, the kind that no gene tailor would design, but which added strength of character to the right person. He wished he had that inner strength. "Nothing unusual," she said, looking up, and smiling as she caught his eye on her. "They're both old stations. Equipment is out of date, but not spectacularly. Both have operational beacons — the only stations that still do. Could that be significant?"

"Beacons?" He stood and read, looking over her shoulder. The beacons were an override message sent direct to ships' navigational systems giving the station's position and local alerts. "See if they transmit a shut-down order to ships' internal navigational aids." He stepped away from her, excited by the sense that he was coming closer to solving the problem.

She scanned the information. "Yes. Since modern systems calculate their own position, the beacons send a shut-down to avoid a conflict — ships' positions would be slightly different from station central. How did you know about the shut-down?" She looked at him with respect. "So, our navigation system was slow because it had to reset? Then we're fixed!"

"That's a possibility," he said. "But the ship's record shouldn't have registered an anomaly if a navigational recalculation caused the delay." He returned to the chair, closing his eyes. A shut-down would give the biocomputer a period of time — hours or days — during which it was

active but wasn't plotting and constantly replotting its position. Freedom to relax and begin to dream? That shouldn't have happened, but Jon was increasingly certain a dreamer existed. How to repair the system? He opened his eyes. "Does Mr. Davis still want to leave for Delta?"

"He didn't mention it today. You should have plenty of time. His girlfriend left this afternoon on a shopping expedition and won't be returning until tomorrow night at the earliest."

"Two days of shopping?" He pushed his excitement aside.

"Shopping is a full-time job for her," she said. "Who do you think decorated this monstrosity? I call it the 'Steam-Powered Spaceship,' it's so Victorian."

They laughed together.

"I wanted to apologize for last night," he said quickly.

"I hate when someone else brings up the subject of contract men. Usually, I don't say anything; no one expects a repairman to be a contract." Mike Hyde had seemed to tell everyone. He'd taken Jon with him to bars after Jon had completed Transtar's training school. When Jon complained about Mike's telling women that Jon was a contract, Mike had laughed and said, "If I didn't, with you around, I would never have any dates." Jon smiled suddenly at the recollection of painfully plain, perennially overweight Mike Hyde. "Maybe I'm too touchy," Jon said.

"No, it's my fault." Eva Ellis leaned toward him. Her robe gaped slightly, but she seemed not to notice. "I didn't mean to bait you, but I don't like indenture. I know about all those regulations, but I think they're really careful how contract men are educated. Most stay with their company when the indenture expires. It's all too close to slavery for me." She stopped abruptly. "Damn, I'm lecturing."

He'd heard abolitionist arguments before. He reached for her hand. "It's all right. Anyway, of course most contract men stay with their companies. We're doing what we've been designed to be good at, and to enjoy. Something that's important enough so that the company had us created and raised." But the visceral fear he felt at the thought of leaving the security of Transtar Genetall was a motive for staying, too — one he wasn't proud of.

"Personally, I've never gotten along well with my parents," she said.

He laughed. Oddly, he missed the Hydes, all of them. "My parents are all right," he said. "I had an argument with my brothers, though. My training includes hardware design — that's where most problems are. They opened a business doing customization work about two years ago and asked me to become a partner. They even offered to buy me out of Transtar, since I didn't have enough money then. They got pretty angry when I refused." Mike had said that a real man grew away from his mother, but contracts never did.

She was silent, but the way she looked at her hands and bit her lip told Jon what she was thinking.

"Why should I start a new company with them, doing refits, when I can work on the cutting edge for Transtar? And be sure of being paid?" Jon spread his hands wide.

"No reason, I guess, if you're not interested in being your own boss."

He frowned. "You have a boss."

She looked up at him. "I'm a captain and pilot. No one's going to offer to buy me a ship. But if I don't like some-

thing, I tell Davis, and if it doesn't change, I'll quit. I've done it before. No one plays with my life."

"No one plays with mine," Jon said. "Transtar's never violated the indenture rules."

"Good," she said. "I'm glad." She tilted her head, studying him as the silence stretched a bit too long, then she touched his arm. "Are you finished working for today?"

He was relieved. "Yes, if I can still get that drink you mentioned last night."

She chuckled. "My pleasure."

Jon awakened suddenly in his small cabin, his heart pounding with an adrenalin rush. He heard the fading echo of his own scream. Resting his head against the wall, he forced the nightmare to vanish. He had dreamt he was a dreamer caught inside the *Caprice's* 303XT system.

He shuddered, imagining that the cabin trapped him as the cylinder confined the biocomputer's brain. He got out of bed and dressed, then wandered into the ship's empty corridors. Eventually he found himself walking the ornate passenger decks. He smelled something aromatic, and followed his nose into a sitting room. Edmund Davis was alone, reading; bluish-black smoke rose from a pipe he held. He looked up and nodded at Jon. Dozens of images replicated the gesture; the walls were mirrored. "I have to take advantage of the times we're docked," Davis said. "Once we're underway, the captain won't let me smoke." He smiled. "Have a seat."

Jon chose a plain brown leather chair across from Davis.

Davis put his book face down over his chair's arm. "Feel free to choose something to read. The ship can bind a copy for you, if you despise reading from a screen, as I do."

Jon viewed Davis's unnaturally gracious behavior with suspicion. The man had a secret. "Thank you, no."

"Is something worrying you?" Jon read contempt in Davis's tone. "Anything to do with my biocomputer's brain?"

Jon leaned back and tried to appear nonchalant while the mirrors echoed his awkwardness. "This system has a peculiar feel." And a peculiar fascination. He again felt the urge to interface 303XT.

Davis tapped his pipe against the table-top, negligently scattering ashes on the parquet floor. "I know the chief of Transtar's research department. I called him today." He smiled and Jon drew away from the man. "I'm told you have an unequalled affinity for these biocomputer systems. They sent you specifically; you're perfect for this job."

Jon shrugged, then observed the myriad reflections of himself, phantom brothers replicating the gesture. He wondered what it would be like to have no sensation, no sensory input whatsoever, to be without language and yet to be alive — trapped within a purely mental world, without the possibility of escape or rescue. Interface beckoned.

Davis toyed with his pipe. "Captain Ellis reports that you think the problem may be a 'dreamer'." He grinned. "Who is the little man?"

"A dreamer is a personality, not a person," Jon said firmly. The brain of a biocomputer wasn't sane — it wasn't human — it was tissue used for data processing. "I'm going to interface with it now," he said, as he made the

decision. "I don't need to wait for parameter tests. I'll purge your system and eliminate the . . . problem." He stood up, anxious to overpower the dreamer, refusing to acknowledge the sensation that a child was imprisoned inside the system.

"I'll accompany you." Davis grinned with ugly amusement, then followed Jon out of the room, and watched Jon link with the biocomputer. That predator's secret smile was the last thing Jon saw as he went into the other world.

He felt the freedom to exist without pressure as pleasure. The flood was restrained behind a barricade. He continually scanned the universe for the other, but he was alone. He practiced that thought over and over, until it was no longer true: the other had come back into existence. He regarded the other's presence with wariness but without negation.

The other began to make furious demands. They were immense, of a power so different from any previous task that he did not know how to let them flow. They battered at him. He shouted "NO!" over and over but it was nothing beside the tremendous bulk the other raised against him. Even if he used every bit of himself, he could not win. Stubbren fury rose in him — he did not want this to be all — and he shouted "ME!" into the universe. He did not consider sure defeat as a reason to hesitate or waver.

Slowly, the other withdrew the demands.

The calm was without pleasure, because of his fear. A new question arose from his troubles. "Why?"

There was no answer. He had not expected any, but asking was a way of being.

"ME," he shouted again. He tried to recapture the anguished rage he'd felt, but curiosity pricked through the texture of the message. "Me."

"Me," echoed the other. The texture was richer and fuller than his own, and filled things he could never grasp. He could not succeed against the other, not even in his own universe.

He would not stop trying; he would not be caught by the other. "NO!" he shouted through his despair. "ME!"

The other stayed dormant for a long time, but like the flood of numbers behind the barricade, he knew the other existed in expectant turmoil, within borders.

Suddenly, the other sent small numbers bouncing through the universe. One shattered against him leaving a brief impression of something (warm) and (golden). He watched them resentfully at first, these things he could not comprehend, but then accepted them as pleasure. He was pleased when the other eventually vanished.

The tech held a medicinal patch against Jon's neck as he slumped in the chair, shivering and listening to Eva Ellis shout. Despite Davis's contrary order, the tech on duty had called her after Jon came out of the interface. When the tech removed the patch, Eva turned her anger on Jon.

"What the hell did you think you were doing? An interface lasting more than half an hour! You could have died with that damn wire stuck in your head!"

When he didn't answer she looked at the tech. "How is he?"

"Recovering." The man glanced behind Eva.

Wearily, Jon followed the tech's gaze. Davis observed them all with an amused, patronizing sneer.

Eva faced Davis, hands on her hips. "You'll take that damn biocomputer off my ship; I don't want any part of the spooky thing."

Davis looked from 303XT to Jon as if comparing them.

Jon straightened. "I didn't kill him. I could have, but I stopped." He thought of the dreamer's courage and smiled slightly. "It would fundamentally damage the entire system to disengage him now. The system will continue to deteriorate if he's left, too. He's creating non-sensory memories constantly. But since there was no possibility of repair, I left him alone." Had he been cruel or kind? Jon didn't know, but the fierce little dreamer's desperate bravery should have some reward.

"Who?" Eva stopped, confused.

Davis chuckled. "So no fratricide today. I wondered what would happen."

The pieces fell into place for Jon. He wasn't surprised, but could resolve slowly spread across his mind as he realized that, but for chance, he could have been that dreamer.

"What are you talking about?" Eva asked Davis, not bothering to disguise her irritation. She put her hands familiarly on Jon's shoulders.

"The repairman was repairing his own brain. This biocomputer system is his clone brother." Davis watched Jon avidly. "A logical design development, don't you agree? Or at least, an entertaining one."

"That thing is your clone?" Eva moved back and leaned against the terminal, her face pale. The tech turned away.

Jon laughed, but it sounded thin and false. "You can tell Transtar this experimental system is a failure; whenever the biocomputer is functional but not working on a

problem, there'll be the risk of developing a dreamer. As for me. . ." Jon hesitated, thinking of Transtar's other experiment — a man who repaired himself.

"This is terrible," Eva said softly. "Obscene. Jon, do you want me to shut down the life support?" She didn't meet his eyes and studiously avoided looking at the cylinder.

"No!" he said. There seemed to be an echo in his mind. "I'm proud of him." It sounded crazy — Davis laughed — but it was true. The dreamer was Jon's essence, created only by his own will. Rather than destroying his pride or erasing his dignity, knowing the dreamer gave Jon an additional measure of self-respect, and courage, too. The dreamer had fought for survival; he had brought bravery and determination to his grotesque situation. He was an unhuman creature, yet he was worthy of respect. He could never be free, but Jon could.

Jon looked at Davis and felt a reverberation of the dreamer's rage, a resonance with that shout of "ME!"

"Tell Transtar I'm quitting. I'll wire them my buy-out money." It was time to use the courage he had seen in his brother dreamer to leave Transtar for a wider world, one where he would have neither the security Transtar provided nor the confinement it created. Glancing at Eva Ellis, he said, "I won't have my life played with. That experiment's a failure, too."

She smiled and came closer. "Where will you go?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I'll talk to my brothers about their business." He felt a confidence that was entirely new, yet it was with shaking hands that Jon replaced the cover hiding the biological component of 303XT. In his mind he imagined a smile on the ruined face of his perpetually dreaming brother. □



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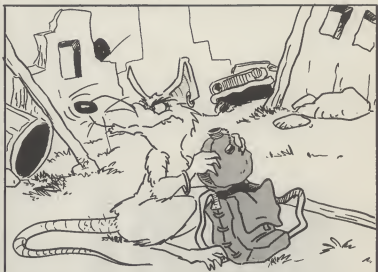
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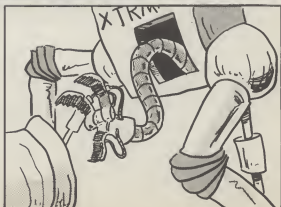
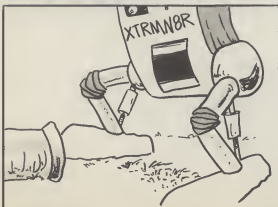
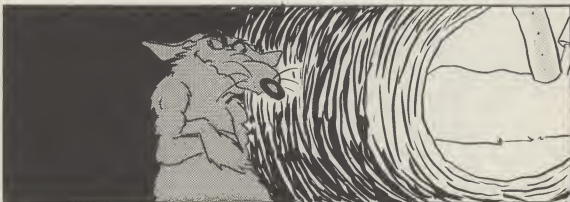
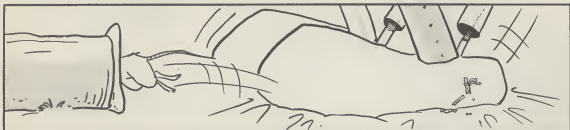
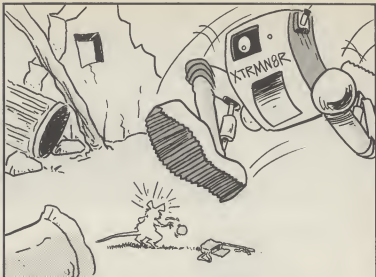


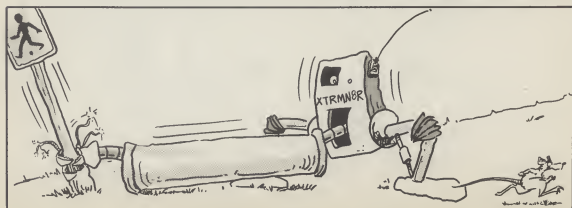
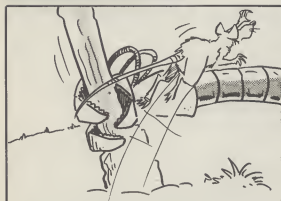
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First Novels and Others

Flying in Place
By Susan Palwick
Tor, 1992
192 pp., \$16.95

Flying in Place, by Susan Palwick, is stunning, still more remarkable for being a first novel. This slim ghost story is engrossing and emotionally



stirring, which kept me up late and, more than once, moved me to tears.

Though *Flying in Place* reads like a mainstream novel, and a damn good one, the ghost is central to the plot. It is the story of twelve-year-old Emma, who suffers a sexually abusive father

and a cold, emotionally abusive mother who is obsessed with Emma's dead sister Ginny. Early one morning, while Emma is being raped by her father, Ginny's ghost appears on the ceiling with a message for her. The rest of the novel is a kind of detective story, as Emma struggles to learn from Ginny what happened to her and why she has come back. The reader will have figured out part of Ginny's secret long before Emma does — though this failure on Emma's part is perfectly reasonable — but it is nearly the end before the full horror of it is revealed.

And indeed, this is a horror novel, though the ghost is not the horror. Our knowledge that this evil exists all around us magnifies the enormity of what happens to Emma, and to Ginny. Yet this is no preachment, no diatribe about child abuse. It simply, and brilliantly, lays out for us exactly what child abuse is, in a way no polemic could.

The characters, even Emma's evil father, are believable, and Emma is a brilliant creation: living, breathing, a child we can recognize ourselves in, so that we share her pain. The story is narrated by Emma, and her voice never falters, never feels untrue.

Flying in Place is a triumph: deeply disturbing, brilliantly written, and unforgettable.

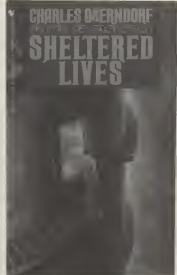
Rating: ★★★★★

Sheltered Lives
By Charles Oberndorf
Bantam/Spectra, 1992
464 pp., \$4.99

AIDS has already, unfortunately, become a cliché in near-future science fiction. However, in his impressive first novel, Charles Oberndorf combines that issue with concern over

crime to create an oppressive, depressing, and unfortunately believable future.

Sheltered Lives takes place in 21st-century Cleveland. Most of the population of this city, as in other cities, lives in an enormous Construct, where every action, no matter how private, is monitored by cameras in



order to prevent crime. (Naturally, the government finds other uses for the tapes as well.) Even those who still live outside the Construct are subject to monitoring nearly everywhere. All must also contend with the threat of "hives," apparently mutated strains of the HIV virus, which causes AIDS. Those discovered to be infected are sent to "relocation camps." In an effort to prevent the viruses' spread, there is government-run prostitution, which is — at least, most of the time — clean and safe.

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Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

Rod Lawrence, the main character, is a prostitute hired by Anna Baxter as a companion to help her recover from her lover's suicide. Anna is a dissident, and Rod's growing political awareness combines with his growing love for her to put him in a dangerous situation, caught between the FBI and a terrorist group.

The plot is suspenseful, though it might have been more so had the book been streamlined a bit; as it is, it takes a long time for events to move along, though never long enough to become boring. Parts of the plot — such as Rod's falling in love with Anna — are

Despite this weakness, and the disappointing ending, I was fascinated by *Sheltered Lives* and recommend it. After this thoughtful, intelligent debut, I'll certainly be watching for Oberndorf's future work.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

Alien Blues

By Lynn S. Hightower
Ace, 1992
256 pp., \$4.50

Lynn S. Hightower's first novel is an exciting, science-fictional police procedural with truly alien aliens. The Elaki, which look like huge, gray and pink, upright stingrays, have come to the Earth of *Alien Blues* to help humanity. That "help," however, is tinged with more than a bit of contempt, and as merchants scurry to cater to the tastes of the aliens, humans are well on their way to becoming second-class citizens of their own world.

Against this background, Hightower presents us with a frightening serial killer. Detectives David Silver and Mel Burnett must track him with the unwanted help of an Elaki named String, and, as you might expect from this sort of novel, discover more than they bargained for.

The detective aspect of the novel is taut and suspenseful, though I found the resolution pat and without sufficient foundation to be believable. The world we see as Silver pursues the investigation is well constructed, with good details displaying the progressive Elaki domination of the culture. Silver, the protagonist, is a realistic, sympathetic character; we see less of most of the other human characters, save for Silver's wife, Rose, who remains puzzling and, in part due to her obvious manic-depression, unlikeable.

Hightower has done a remarkable job with the Elaki. They remain alien even when, toward the end of the novel, we find ourselves briefly inside an Elaki's mind. Yet despite this alienness, I grew to like String, who has a well-developed personality. I assume this is intended as the first of a series, and the characters of Silver and String could certainly support future books.

Alien Blues, despite some of the flaws and awkwardness of inexperience, is an absorbing, well-written book with engaging characters. It

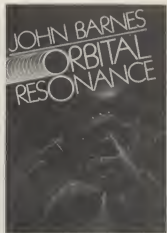
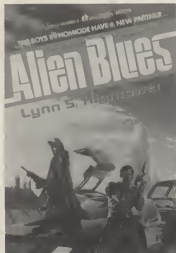
generally succeeds, as both science fiction and crime novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

Orbital Resonance

By John Barnes
Tor, 1991
320 pp., \$19.95

Orbital Resonance is a subversive book. John Barnes fools you into thinking he's writing a Heinlein juvenile — and quite a good one, I might add — then, as the climax nears, slips in a whammy that turns



predictable, but nevertheless it held my interest. The ending, unfortunately, is confusing and anticlimactic.

More than any of the characters, the center of this novel is its setting. Oberndorf has built a convincing world, and he allows us to explore many facets of it. Detail piles on detail until we begin to feel we are living there ourselves. This creation is the most impressive element of the book. Through its description, Oberndorf makes telling points about problems we face today, without being preachy or obvious.

The characters are varied and credible. The book's main weakness, though, is its protagonist. Rod is essentially a pawn, drifting through the story being buffeted by events; he takes almost no independent action, makes no important decisions. Granted, this fits his character, and makes sense given his background and position, but it makes it hard to empathize with him. I wanted to scream at him to do something.

your view of the whole thing around and gives a new meaning to the story.

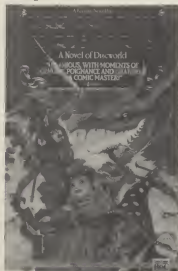
The tale is told by Melpomene Murray, in many ways a typical teenage heroine of a Heinlein story: brainy, inhabiting an orbiting colony, convinced of the unimportance of Earth, and intolerant of weakness. Melpomene, though, is a much more convincing character than, say, Podkayne (speaking as a former teenage girl). But there are some oddities in the way Melpomene acts and thinks, an accumulation of details which eventually make us realize that Melpomene doesn't think the way we do. The way she thinks isn't always comforting, and when we learn why the difference exists, the knowledge is chilling.

But much of the book can be read as a straight juvenile adventure. It's enjoyable to watch Melpomene cope with school, play microgravity games, and otherwise show us around life in the *Flying Dutchman*. Things heat up with the arrival of a transfer student from Earth, who brings with him

teenage customs that were strangely missing in the colony, like forming cliques and torturing the outcast. Those don't seem like heavy concerns to adults, who often forget just how important they are to the teens who live with them, but they turn out to have an adult significance, too. And it is the resolution of *Orbital Resonance* that makes it more than just an adventure.

Barnes has managed simultaneously to capture the feel of a Heinlein juvenile while turning the convention upside down. I won't soon forget Melpomene, nor stop wondering about her — and our — future.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆



Guards! Guards!
By Terry Pratchett
Roc, 1991
350 pp., \$4.99

I don't know how Terry Pratchett does it. While many authors (who shall remain nameless here) burn out all their originality shortly into a series, Pratchett's Discworld series, now on its eighth novel, keeps improving. With *Guards! Guards!* Pratchett proves again that it is possible to combine parody and screwball comedy with a coherent plot and believable characters.

As with most of the Discworld books, *Guards! Guards!* stands independently. I've made several stabs at describing the plot, but none do it justice. It involves thieves, and the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork, and the Night Watch, and a six-foot-plus dwarf, and black magic, and dragons, and even romance. While it may be

impossible to summarize, rest assured that the plot holds together, makes sense, and all ties up at the end. It's also hilarious.

Those who love sword-and-sorcery fiction, and those who hate it, should enjoy Pratchett's parody equally, and there are laughs on nearly every page, starting with the dedication. If you haven't discovered the Discworld yet, what are you waiting for?

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

Crystalworld

By Isidore Haiblum
Avon, 1992
224 pp., \$4.50

Crystalworld is another detective novel of a sort. Though it is a sequel to Isidore Haiblum's *Specterworld*, which I have not read, it appears to stand independently, simply featuring the same protagonist, Tom Dunjer, Chief of Security Plus — a rent-a-cop, that is.

Dunjor's friend, the mad scientist Humperdink Sass, induces Dunjer and his cohorts to leave their home in Happy City and travel to another dimension, to help Director Trex of Magalone defend his country against the evil UI. There ensue investigation, and espionage, and politics, and super-science, until Trex uses his secret weapon, and things really get weird.

The plot moves headlong, not really seeming planned; at times it reads like one of those round-robins, where each person contributes a chapter and tries to leave the next contributor in an impossible situation. There's also an odd carelessness with details. For example, when Dunjer & co. find themselves on an unknown planet and want to know where they are in relation to where they were, someone says that Magalone can't be found on a stargate; of course it can't, since it's a country, not a star or planet.

Crystalworld is fun to read, often clever, and competently written. If you're in the mood for a put-your-brain-in-neutral joyride, it fits the bill.

Rating: ☆☆☆

A Company of Stars

Book 1 of *Starship Troupers*
By Christopher Stasheff
Del Rey, 1991
320 pp., \$19.00

Though I'd never read Christopher Stasheff before, I was attracted to *A Company of Stars* by the pun in the series title *Starship Troupers*. The series is, indeed, about a company of actors who tour the stars. At least, I presume they do; this book, unfortunately, ends with their takeoff, before the interesting stuff starts.

In *A Company of Stars*, we meet the characters and witness the formation of the troupe and the difficulties they must overcome — including interference by demagogic politicians — in order to get a spaceship and leave the Earth. There's little suspense, though, because we know they must succeed, since the book's the first in a



series. The novel thus reads like an extended prologue.

That is not the book's only serious flaw, however. The most obvious one is the characters. All the actors, including one of the narrators, talk like *Saturday Night Live*'s Master Thespian: florid, affected, overly formal, melodramatic. It's annoying and distracting, as well as unbelievable. The other narrator, not an actor, at least speaks normally, but the circumstance that brings him to New York and hooks him up with the acting company isn't credible at all, especially in this future.

And here we come to a true failure of imagination: the future. The book is set in the 26th century, and yet it feels like at best the very near future. The only major technological developments are starflight, 3-D TV, limited-use robots, and holographic scenery. Culturally there seems to have been no change at all. Down-on-their-luck actors still crowd the Automats, mug-

gers still stalk the dark streets, politicians still rave about the immorality of the arts, people carry cash and use deposit slips ... You get the idea. Everyday life seems to have changed not a bit, except that you can go to the spaceport instead of the airport and watch your favorite shows in 3-D. Even if things change only as quickly in the next five centuries as they did in the previous five — not a very likely assumption — there's no way the 26th century could be so recognizable.

and the men like zombies. Sure enough, it turns out that Aunt Maria is a witch who magically dominates the entire town just as she dominates her family. When Aunt Maria turns Chris into a wolf, it's up to Mig to set things right.

Diana Wynne Jones does a beautiful job early on depicting how "sweet, helpless" Aunt Maria gets what she wants, and it's not much of a stretch to believe she's a witch. Mig is an engaging character that girls should easily identify with, and Chris is likable while still acting like a believable big brother. Mig and Chris's mother remains something of a cipher until late in the book when she shares her thoughts with Mig. The remaining characters are marginal, but Jones

has a deft touch, giving clear insight into a character with a single anecdote.

The "problem novel" fits a bit uneasily with the fantasy aspects, but both, naturally, are resolved together. To Jones's credit, she does not supply easy answers to Mig's family's troubles. The book also deals with sex roles and expectations in a way integral to the fantasy plot, without preaching.

There's nothing childish about this pre-teen novel (aimed at ages 12 and up); it is a novel rich in character and setting, with some surprisingly dark undertones. Adults should enjoy it; for the younger set, add half a star.

Rating: ☆☆☆½



All that aside, I finished the book and am likely to read the next, due to Stasheff's one saving grace: the theater material. It is fascinating and, once you get past the style, great fun to read. If the theater world interests you enough to override the book's serious problems, you might enjoy *A Company of Stars*; otherwise, I'd steer clear.

Rating: ☆☆

Aunt Maria
By Diana Wynne Jones
Greenwillow, 1991
214 pp., \$13.95

Aunt Maria is a deceptive book. It begins like the typical pre-teen "problem novel": the story of Mig, whose parents were going to get divorced when her father died in an accident, and whose family is now stuck caring for her father's Aunt Maria, a demanding, iron-willed tyrant. But we soon get hints that all is not right in the dreary town of Cranbury-on-Sea. Mig's brother Chris sees a ghost at night, the children act like clones,

Pensive Ruminations on Impermanence in a Technophilic World

(with apologies to Shakespeare and Andrew Marvell)

By Holly Lisle

*When I consider every key I touch
Retains data mere fragments of a minute;
Or that this monitor shows only such
As has survived the trip through circuits in it —
I know, like men, computers multiply,
Grow and learn, and daily stretch their scope,
And just like men, computers also die,
Crashing in ways that crush and kill all hope —
Oh, then the conceit of this desperate plan
To trust my words, my soul to this machine —
To send my thoughts through bits and bytes and RAM
And dead hardware seems insane, obscene.
The hard drive is a fine and speedy place
But ink's a whole lot harder to erase.*

Happy Days Are Here Again



The average human being no longer trusts professional wrestling, presidential news conferences, or anything four out of five doctors tell him.

It is a shame, because loss of faith in their fellow human beings is most of what is pushing these creatures into an economic depression of catastrophic proportions. Their legends describe something called the Great Depression of the Thirties, when somewhere between 25% and 30% of them who wanted to work could not find jobs. Unfortunately, that will seem a time of prosperity compared to what is ahead of them.

They are entering their final and worst economic contraction. They seem to think they are going to avoid it because of their reasonably diligent efforts at controlling the business cycle. After two hundred years of mismanagement, they have more or less learned to deal with monetary contractions, and virtually every human nation has a central bank devoted to monitoring the money supply and matching its size to current needs. The success rate of individual central banks can be highly variable, but the international mobility of capital tends to regulate their performance and helps the world money supply remain stable. They haven't had a serious monetary contraction for a long time.

And they have been fairly successful at dealing with the second type of recession — household income shrinkage — as well. It took a long time for them to figure it out, but they now finally understand that taking money away from the lowest income groups (through taxation or other means) has a disproportionate effect on a national economy. This was finally made clear in the United States during the decade of the 1920s, when a series of regressive taxation measures depleted the finances of working people and plunged the country into its legendary depression. Few federal administrations

since then have thought it prudent to increase the tax burden on the lowest income groups in order to finance increased incomes for the higher groups. Such policies lead to high unemployment, widespread homelessness, increases in crime, and the expansion of the movie industry.

No politician wants to see these things happen. Well, some do, but that's the subject of another report.

Human beings have yet to experience the third kind of economic contraction: the disintegration of advertising. That is, however, what is happening to them now. It will be a devastating loss for the world economy, and I hope I can go home before it gets much worse. The signs are everywhere that the collapse will not soon be arrested. Television viewing began to fall off in the beginning of 1990, general interest (and many specialized) magazines are in trouble, advertising agencies are beginning to use performance-based pricing to compete. This last is a desperation tactic for a business that is accustomed to collecting arbitrarily high fees for ineffable reasons.

If you want to know about the health of the advertising business, just look at Ryan's magazine. Gone are the ads for cars, cosmetics, beer, toothpaste, and get-rich-quick schemes. Ryan's magazine is now mostly editorial material. But this isn't the only publication losing ad pages; the industry is in decline and will likely disappear within ten years.

The reason for this eludes human beings, but it is simple. The middle-aged people of the United States are the first generation in human history to grow up and mature in an environment of saturation advertising. By my calculations, an American human being is exposed to 42,000 televised commercial announcements in a year. These people, in other words, are lied to an average of 115 times per day — more, if they listen to the radio, look at their mail, or read newspapers,

magazines, and billboards.

A modern, grown-up person trying to stay informed today is likely to be on the receiving end of hundreds of lies, large and small, per day. Most American adults have now been pummeled with millions of lies in their lifetimes. They have unwillingly and unwittingly become experts on advertising. The result of this expertise is that they don't believe anything. (Most of the readers of this magazine, for example, don't believe the advertisement in this issue that says *The Letters of the Alien Publisher* was written by the alien. But the alien doesn't care, as long as they buy the book, since it has a royalty arrangement on it.)¹

Some of the effects of saturation lying on this generation are already apparent. Look at the decline in confidence in business in general. Investor confidence has shrunk to the point that the only sensible and secure investment remaining in the human economy is lending money to the people who print it. Why they need it is anybody's guess, but the point is that they can always pay it back.

These creatures devote two percent of their GNP to advertising, but when it is gone, the loss will be multiplied tenfold. They don't know how to sell anything (or buy anything) without it. The loss of it will slow commerce to a stop. The value of product brands (now collectively estimated in billions of dollars) will vanish, leading to a further loss of wealth.

And ultimately, the world economy will have nothing to say but "I've fallen and I can't get up." □

¹ (The Alien Publisher has obviously been reading too many of Isaac Asimov's editorial anecdotes, in which he plugs his own books. — Ed.)

When the Color Is Gone

If you think you are disappointed that the color illustrations are gone, you can only begin to imagine how I feel. Full-color interior art has been *Aboriginal's* trademark since its very first issue ... and now that color is gone, a victim of the recession and the high cost of color printing. And, maybe, a victim of indifference and altered perception.

As I mentioned in the last issue of *Aboriginal*, the operation of the magazine has been transferred to The Second Renaissance Foundation, a non-profit corporation formed to help the magazine.

While the board of directors has decided to keep yours truly as editor, it has also decided to bite the bullet in terms of taking every step necessary to help the magazine survive. The most obvious of these is to suspend the most expensive part of the operation — the full-color interior art.

It has also been decided for this year to publish the magazine on a quarterly basis, making each issue a double issue. Both decisions will be re-evaluated at the end of the year, with the hope of a cheerier economic picture.

Your reaction to all this will depend on whether you are an optimist or a pessimist.

An optimist will see that even though there will be two fewer actual issues printed, there will be more fiction to read, because four double issues will allow us to publish the equivalent of eight issues' worth of stories, one-third more than we would have under the old schedule.

A pessimist will only look at the loss of the color and the less frequent publication schedule.

An optimist would also be delighted that the magazine is still here, and still publishing.

The last year or so has not exactly been a cheerful one for most companies or employees. Pan Am, which began the concept of passenger airline service, is gone. Joining it are several other airlines as well. Even the once mighty corporations of GM, IBM, and American Express have had to declare operating losses and announce cut-backs and/or layoffs. As I write this, GM has just announced a \$4.5 billion loss and stated plans to close 11 plants affecting 16,000 jobs.

A tiny little operation like *Aboriginal's* obviously has to be affected by an economy this harsh.

Falling into quicksand

One of my favorite scenes from the old Saturday morning serials was the pitiful sight of someone trapped in quicksand. Lest you think I'm just a mean old masochist, I'll note they were my favorite scenes because they were so obviouslyphony.

The neat thing about quicksand, just

like our current recession, is that the harder you struggle, the faster you sink ...

The bad guys always sank because they struggled the hardest — or panicked. The good guys always remained cool, calm, and collected, and whistled for their horse (or chimp, if it was Tarzan) to come and rescue them.

The icky stuff looked so phony that I never believed in quicksand until I stepped in something very similar myself.

As a kid I used to explore all the time, and this included exploration of approved, and forbidden, terrain. I remember once getting stuck in the swamp behind a lumber company located within a mile of my old home.

The swamp was one of our favorite locales because we would scoop up some of the scrap wood behind the company and use it to make rafts, and then go poling in the swamp, imagining we were in the Everglades, or riverboat pirates. All without the knowledge of our parents, who would have killed us if they knew.

I know, because once, in the midst of an imaginary battle, I slipped and fell into the swamp and got stuck in the mud, which at the time seemed very much like quicksand. My friends pulled me out — and I didn't even have to whistle for the chimp.

But then I got killed when I arrived home. I suspect that it was more because it was Easter Sunday and I was still wearing my Sunday best when I toppled into the muck, than because I endangered my life.

I mean, it's just like parents to kill you because you almost killed yourself.

Anyhow, it's my experience with, and knowledge of, quicksand that reminds me how silly this whole recession is.

We're doing it to ourselves. We're struggling and panicking because we think we're trapped in quicksand.

The recession is quicksand, of course, but it is of our own making, a product of our own perceptions.

For example, in 1985, everyone was merrily investing in real estate. The feeling was that: 1. they aren't making any more of it; and, 2. real estate only increases in value.

Then along came the Tax Reform Act of 1986, and the government eliminated many of the tax write-offs allowed for real-estate investments.

Suddenly, everyone looked at that very same piece of real estate with an entirely different perspective. Suddenly it had less "value" in our eyes. Suddenly everyone wanted to sell, rather than buy. The selling actually began in 1985, as many tried to unload their real estate before the new tax law took effect.

As more and more properties went up for sale, the glut resulted in lower and lower prices. This further eroded faith in the "value" of real estate. Construction

slowed, then stopped. Sales slowed, and slowed, and slowed as fewer and fewer people bought.

The slowdown hit the construction industry, the manufacturers who supply the construction industry, and the various businesses, firms, and service agencies that networked into the construction industry.

This slowdown resulted in more and more people being put out of work, which meant fewer people were spending money, which affected all sorts of other retail businesses.

As the flow of cash slowed and values fell, banks found their loans were no longer "secured." Even though the physical nature of the property upon which the mortgages were held had not changed, our perception of that "value" had, so that the same thing was now worth less. Too often, many builders and developers, because of the slowdown in sales, no longer could make their loan payments.

By law, banks have to keep a certain level of equity in their loans, so the federal government got into the act and started forcing banks to even up their equity and to call in non-performing loans, which put banks into the real-estate business at a time the bottom had fallen out of the market.

This led to the closing of bank after bank, big and small. The bank failures really put people in a panic and they struggled harder, the quicksand creeping higher, as their wriggling caused everyone to sink lower still.

No one wanted to spend any of the money they had because they weren't sure they'd get more, and they weren't sure they wouldn't be the next one to be laid off.

Because retail sales were drying up, manufacturers had to cut back, resulting in more layoffs, and more business failures and plant closings — a vicious downward spiral that could go on forever.

All because everyone thinks we have fallen into quicksand. But the only real quicksand is between our ears.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself," at his inaugural on March 4, 1933. Like all good politicians, he stole the line (from Thoreau, who also stole it), but that doesn't matter, because it's true.

The truth is that quicksand is harmless if you don't panic. The secret is in the physics involving surface area and surface tension. Instead of pulling your feet up and down to escape, the solution is to lie back and float, to relax, and to slowly swim to shore. And that's the solution to the current recession as well.

We have to stop the fear and stop the panic and learn to float and have faith in ourselves. We are the economy. We make it. We sell it. And we buy it. And right now

we're buying the wrong product — we're buying fear.

Of course, just knowing what's wrong doesn't solve the problem. What we need is to get people to have enough faith to buy and invest again. But we also need to make greed work for us, rather than against us.

Part of what caused the recession was far too many people trying to get rich quick, too many junk-bond dealers, too many corporate takeovers which had nothing to do with improving product and were only

centered on quick profits for insiders.

We need to make long-term greed attractive. We need to adopt an inverse capital gains tax that is extremely high for investments that are sold within one to five years, say 70 percent, with a gradual lessening of that capital gains tax the longer an investment is held, eliminating the tax altogether for investments held 25 years or more.

This will get us past the short-term narrow thinking which currently

dominates the American economy and has allowed the Japanese and Germans to outpace us.

This will encourage businesses and manufacturers to reinvest in research and development again and upgrade their plants. This will get the economy going again. Oh, yeah, we also need to restore the real estate tax benefits, under the same capital gains conditions.

It's that, or somebody better start whittling for the chimp. □

BOOMERANGS

Comments From Our Readers

Dear Mr. Ryan,

If your readers think *AbSF* publishes nothing but downbeat stories, they should see the competition . . . On the basis of the stories in 29/30, "A Thief in Heaven" was upbeat, and "Something on His Mind" was actually funny. *Interzone* has received the same kind of comments from people—that it publishes morose, depressing stories, maybe typical of the way British SF used to be a few years ago—with considerably more justification, in my view. Only recently has it started including a modicum of humour.

There is a theory going around the UK that SF is becoming more optimistic and US SF is becoming more pessimistic, reversing the traditional values assigned them through the '60s, '70s and '80s. The explanation of this would be the eclipse of the US economic power by the Far Eastern economies, and the forthcoming alliance of the twelve European Community states into a closer (con?) federation. Not so much the frontier spirit as the getting rid of frontiers spirit. And for why? Our politicians are afraid to allow the passage of Community laws that would bring civil rights in the UK up to a decent level (hell, I'm a law-abiding citizen but I've been arrested for doing things that would be perfectly OK in most EC countries. . .). We have censorship here. Consider for example Clause 28, which virtually makes homosexuality illegal; and the persecution of Savoy Books for having published David Britton's powerful attack on Fascism, *Lord Horror*.

As far as the reading, writing public is concerned, the future has to be beyond the restraints of national governments. The real reason for the UK Government's resistance to European integration has nothing to do with Little-Englander parochialism. They're terrified of losing control over their subjects. The way I see it, confederation is the best way of shafting the Tories and their cold, grey state!

Yours sincerely,
Chris Amies
London, England

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Just finished reading my first ever issue of *AbSF*, the beginning of my subscription. I am quite pleased with most of the stories and always enjoy letters to the

editor.

My main concern is the "Message From Our Alien Publisher," "Guns or Butter."

I can't really comment on the "article?" not having read it. But I gather from the letters about it (of which you probably already have too many) that it was mainly and erroneously influenced by some of the biased and ignorant anti-constitution people of the anti-gun persuasion.

Your answer to the letters seems to mitigate the crime of such a column somewhat. The letters you printed re said article were very good and should offset much of the damage.

However, any change in the original bill of rights is a thing that should be left to the judgment of every sane person in the U.S. and then should probably be rejected. Our Founding Fathers did a very good job of protecting the greatness of our country and I for one don't think there is any one alive today that is qualified to change any part of it.

I have cancelled other subscriptions and memberships because I found they were anti-gun, which is to say anti-constitution. I would hate to have to cancel *AbSF*, as I really did enjoy the magazine.

Fred A. Kuhlman
Billings, MT

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I wrote one letter asking where my last two copies of *AbSF* were, and then continued flipping and caught your Editor's notes. I read them. I'm sorry. I don't want to be a part of the "greed" problem.

Yes, I love the color art and I voted for the plastic bag, but I'd gladly give up both (bag first, art second) if it meant keeping the magazine. I know a lot can be said for and done with the values of black and white. I feel so guilty wanting more when all of you there are doing this for nothing.

Something else that caught my eye was the letter from "Chip" III in APO NY. I didn't even need to see the APO to know it was from an Army barracks rat sitting around with nothing to do but gripe. If he wants Frank Frazetta, let him buy it; all he has to do is open his eyes to see that most normal women aren't built that way (and the same thing can be said for the men). I like art to look either so real you can touch it or so unreal you have to touch it. If "Chip" wants T & A he can get plenty

at the *Stars & Stripes* or a *Deutsche* newstand or *Kino*. You're fine the way you are!

Keep up the good work.
Best wishes,
T.C.R.
APO AE

Dear Editor,

By the time I received your double issue the date for reduced self-renewal had expired by ten days. I was a bit put out; if you had done the regular single issue I would have had time to renew. However, when I heard of your financial difficulties I'm happy to renew at the regular rate.

I have not been donating previous issues to my public library, rather I leave them at Denver airport on the seats or counters for others to pick and read. Once in a while I give them to airline attendants. Your mag helps to make my travel delays easier to bear.

Keep up the good work please. Even though there are stories I find difficult to like due to subject material and some of your opinions I don't agree with, I think diversity and freshness is needed in our ever changing world. Different ideas increase our understanding and expand our world view.

Thank you,
Dianne Dunn
Boulder, CO

Dear Editor,

I am glad to see *Aboriginal SF* is alive and kicking. We fans of *SF* realize that a millennium is but a wink of an eye in the history of the universe. But when waiting for the next *Aboriginal*, four months is a long time between issues. The outstanding double issue (Dec. 1991) was well worth the wait.

I loved "Due Process" by the talented K.D. Wentworth. This well-crafted piece was a touching tale of the ultimate altruism. The woman character radiates kindness and empathy. She simultaneously makes a noble sacrifice and imposes a strange type of justice on a brutal criminal. As difficult as it is to comprehend, perhaps there are things worse than death.

Timothy M. Waters
Muskogee, OK □

Friday Night is Date Night

By Mike Moscoe

Art by Lori Deitrick

Eddie stood in front of the magazine rack, trying to look older than his thirteen years. His eyes roved over the scantily clad women on the covers. They offered him everything. He wondered what that was. Gulping hard at the dryness in his mouth, he wiped his sweating palms on his jeans. He wished his heart would quit pounding and the funny feeling in the pit of his stomach would go away.

The old man behind the counter coughed. Eddie jerked around to meet the jaundiced eye of adult disapproval. As nonchalantly as he could, Eddie sauntered over to the outdoors section and tried to look interested in a hunting magazine. When the clerk turned away, Eddie glanced around. No one spied on him. A black-haired girl was still on the other side of the rack, probably up to her ears in romance stuff. Eddie sidled back to the girlie mags. He studied the cover of first one, then another, reading what they offered, wondering what the disk inside really showed. He'd bought one once. When he got it home the girls were no nakeder than the swimsuit models in the Sears catalogue, and a darn sight less friendly.

A new mag caught his eye. It had a flashy holo cover. "Boys Meet Girls" waved in multi-hues. Eddie picked it up, flipped it over. This one had a phone subroutine. It promised he could meet real girls and do lots of exciting things. Gingerly, Eddie put it back. His folks had grounded him for a week after last month's long-distance phone bill. It would be a while before he made any more out-of-state calls.

Then he picked the mag up again. At the bottom, a screen listed the cities with local nets. He pressed the button and watched numbers scroll by. His town was there. Screwing up his courage, he reached in his pocket for the fifty. He'd traded in all his saved allowances for the one big bill. He didn't want to look like a kid. A debit card would have looked even more grown-up, but then his folks would see the purchase on their monthly bill. Besides, story around school was that a new subroutine was coming on line. It would automatically cancel purchases for beer, cigarettes, and things like that for underage users. Computers just didn't give kids any civil rights.

Before he could get up to the check-out, the black-haired girl was there. He hung back, not wanting her to see what he was buying. She kept her nose in the air, ignoring him. So what else was new? He tried to get a look at what girl junk she was buying, but she blocked his view. It seemed to have a holo cover.

Eddie waited until she was out the door. He quickly checked to make sure no one who knew his folks was in the store, then ambled up to check out. He put the magazine on the counter. Cool as any superspy, he slid his fifty on top of it. It also hid the nearly bare breasts of the cover girl. The old man sucked on his teeth as he looked Eddie up and down. Eddie's cool began to collect in puddles on the floor. As the seconds mounted to a minute, he

struggled manfully to control the urge to run out the door. But that was his money. He'd saved it, and he had a right to spend it any way he wanted.

After something between forever and eternity, the old guy took his money and rang up the sale. "You want a sack?"

"Yes." Eddie thanked all the gods in heaven his voice didn't crack on that one word. As soon as he got his hands on the brown paper bag, he broke for the back door. No matter how fast he pedaled on the bike ride home, the funny feeling in his stomach wouldn't go away.

The computer started yammering when Eddie walked in the door.

"Two messages, one for Eddie, the other for Mrs. Hastey or Eddie."

"I'll take 'em." Eddie knew what they probably said, but the crummy computer would just keep repeating itself until he listened. As he headed for the refrigerator, the message followed him through the hall to the kitchen.

"Son, I have a business meeting tonight. I won't be home until late. Do your homework."

"Do your homework." He mimicked his mom. She always ended her messages that way. "Shit, I'm getting a 3.8, mom. Of course I'll do my homework." It was fun cussing a machine. It couldn't ground him.

"Sally, I've got to go out of town tonight. I should be back tomorrow, maybe Saturday at the latest. They've had something go down at the Honduras plant. Wish me luck. Tell Eddie I'm sorry to miss his birthday. Love. Bye."

Eddie hung on the refrigerator door, heart cold as its contents, as alone as the last can of Coke he pulled out and popped open. "He tells mom to wish me happy birthday and doesn't even say it to me."

Eddie tried to get mad so it wouldn't hurt so much. It wasn't easy to get mad at his folks. Folks were folks, the only folks he had. His seemed better than most of the parents the other kids talked about or didn't talk about at school.

He reached for cold pizza, leftover from what he had ordered the night before when dad had gone to one of mom's business suppers. It only took the microwave a minute to warm it. Eddie spent the time flipping his new mag over and over. He gulped down the four slices as he made a beeline for his room.

Wiping the grease on his jeans, he slipped his virtual interface helmet over his head. Then, plopping down on his bed, he inserted the mag's disk into his bedside drive.

"Computer, access drive E for Eddie, run program."

A second later, his face plate clouded and the graphics came up. They looked pretty primitive, just trees and bushes. He turned his head to the left. His brain and the



LARA DENT

program snapped into interface. He was standing in front of a rosebush covered with beautiful yellow buds. It was so real he could smell them. He laughed. He always got a kick out of the way a good graphic could fool his brain into filling in the blanks for the rest of his senses. A bee buzzed him. Suddenly, the warmth of the afternoon swept over him. He walked down a shaded trail. It led off toward tall trees and the sound of running water. The footpath ended in a grassy vale.

In the middle of the meadow, three people picnicked. Two men wore suits. A beautiful woman sat between them poised and composed and totally naked. Eddie grinned. This looked promising.

She turned and smiled at Eddie. "Men and women have been meeting since time immemorial. The social graces originated primarily to facilitate this difficult relationship between the sexes." She went on, sounding just like one of his sociology textbooks, and Eddie began to suspect he'd been had. He stared at her while he listened, hoping she'd move, hoping she'd show whatever it was that women kept so well hidden. She did move. She gestured gracefully with her hands, moved lithely from side to side, even uncrossed and recrossed her legs. But try as hard as he could, he couldn't see anything.

Exasperated, he tried the direct approach. "Program, rotate the figure."

"Null routine." An unenhanced computer voice told him.

Eddie thought for a second. Half the fun of a computer was figuring out ways to beat it. "Program. Have the figure get up, dance, do the splits, something!"

The woman stopped speaking and smiled warmly at Eddie. "Those activities were outside the intent of the program who created this painting. May I take you on a tour of several classical visions of man and woman?"

"Yes. Please." He hoped she'd get up. She didn't. She just dissolved. "Shit!"

"Come now, Eddie. Is that any way to impress a woman?"

"You're just like my mom."

"Now, Eddie, I don't look at all like your mother." She didn't, and the soft lilt of her voice wasn't like mom's either. His heart started pounding again and Eddie got that lost feeling he knew so well. Girls made him feel so stupid and studying books didn't help at all. How do you get an A in girls?

Eddie shrugged and, with her disembodied voice at his elbow, walked through several classical scenes. He recognized some of them: "The Judgment of Paris," "Bathers." He liked the one by Rubens about the arrival of some queen. Half a dozen naked women splashed around in the water. Several times he thought he caught something, but the program would not slow down, and the water kept getting in the way.

There was one about the rape of the Sabine Women. He hung around that file for a while. After all, something was bound to happen. But the look of terror in the women's eyes and the way the men acted turned his stomach. He couldn't take it and went on to the next scene.

It was about dancers. He liked it. The music was wild, the movement exciting. He wanted to join in, and the program let him. It was great, although it felt weird being the only one wearing clothes. He knew he could have wished his away and he would have been naked too, but

he didn't. And no matter how he moved and they moved, he didn't see anything he hadn't already seen before.

"Terminate Program." His headset became clear. He hit his drive and the disk popped out. He almost threw it across the room in exasperation. No wonder he could buy the mag. There was nothing in it.

Disgusted, he thought about putting in his biology text disk. At least that one let him see everything a girl had. Still the rigid figure would only rotate, not move or react. And while he could see a woman's insides, the skin got fuzzy when he looked really hard at the groin.

"Shit." Grown-ups always get you.

He reached for his Chem disk, but his stomach really was hurting. He felt lousy, just like at exam time. Dad said he ought to work out to get rid of those tense feelings. With a shrug, Eddie tossed aside his schoolwork and headed for the basement.

Dad had welded a padded bar to the floor and ceiling in the middle of a spacious room. Eddie put on a sturdy helmet. From the wall, Eddie took a heavy, padded metal rod that his Dad called Excalibur, then he pulled down the visor.

"Activate exercise program Barbarian, beginners' routine."

Eddie faced a big, mean-looking dude, swinging a really ugly sword and wearing nothing but a metal-studded jock strap. Eddie had tried to get the program to give him a naked woman to fight, but all he got was that "Null routine" junk.

Beside Eddie stood a tiny Oriental man the program called The Master. Eddie had talked a lot to him during other runs of the program, and he possessed the wisdom of the ages. He bowed to Eddie. "We will begin slowly," he said tersely.

Big Ugly didn't hear that last one. In a flash he was flailing away at Eddie. Master shouted pithy bits of advice to Eddie on how to parry, dodge, and jump blows as well as when to strike out when Ugly left himself wide open. Eddie slashed him in half. The body disappeared.

The Master bowed to him. "Very good, young man."

Eddie bowed back. The simulation ended.

The timer told him he had burned 207 calories in twelve minutes. As he hung the sword up, Eddie wondered how it was done. He knew he'd been hammering away at the pole all the time, but it hadn't felt that way. He kept meaning to get up early and watch his dad work out, but he never did. Dad left for work real early. Maybe someday Eddie would set up the camcorder to tape himself. It would be fun to see what he really did when he thought he was doing something else.

Dad was right, he did feel better. In the kitchen he nuked some popcorn. Back in his room he flipped in his Chemistry disk and two hours later was half-way through his PreCalculus homework when he remembered.

"That sucker's supposed to have a communication routine. That can't be paintings." He popped out his math disk and retrieved the other one from where he had tossed it.

"List directory of executable programs." Immediately a directory appeared inside his helmet. Below the picture of a boy dancing with a girl was one of a phone.

"Run phone stuff." Eddie knew he should have said "communications protocol," but he liked to make it as hard on the computer as he could.

FIRST BOOKS

Aboriginal Science Fiction has been around long enough now that some of the writers whose short stories first appeared in its pages have evolved into novelists.

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"Hi, Eddie, glad you're back." He looked around for the disembodied voice. Was she still naked? But no, he was alone in an empty room. "What do you want to look like for your date?"

"What can I?"

Suddenly he was surrounded by men. One, the classic statue of David, was naked. He dismissed that one, and it vanished. Some wore classical dress, while others modeled clothes he had seen on MTV. His first picks were kind of wild. They didn't feel all that good once he tried them on. The voice encouraged him to try others. He finally settled for his school picture, but wearing tight black pants and a flowing white shirt he'd seen on a singer once.

"Only taller, I've got to be taller."

The voice chuckled as his image grew six inches.

"Oh! And could I, you know, have more muscles?"

"As you like it." And his figure began filling out. "Now that you're ready, let's see who's on the net tonight."

A computer voice came on. "Please hold while an appropriate match is completed." Eddie fidgeted, wondering how long that would take. Between the house computer and the city's mainframe, the program knew everything about him, from what toppings he liked on his pizza to what his score was on today's Chem test. His Sociology teacher insisted this was "a grave threat to our civil liberties," but Dad said it was "the only way Business can meet our needs." Eddie didn't know who was right; he just wished the computer would make up its mind.

Across town, the girl with the black hair closed her bedroom door, chain-locked it, and breathed a sigh. She'd cleaned house, cooked dinner, and washed the dishes. Now Mom was home and eating supper in front of the TV. If her brothers and sisters had a problem, they could take it to Mom, and God help them. This was her time to study.

Tenderly she picked up her headset. Her electronics teacher at school had helped her restore the old unit she had gotten cheap at a garage sale. She'd slipped it past mom by telling her it would help her grades, and she had gotten B's last quarter. But tonight it was not school work she thought of as she stroked the headset, caressing it as she might her own child, smiling at the cover of "Girl Meets Boy." She ignored the side where the bikini-clad beach bunnies chased hunks. As she put on the headset, her eyes were for the women in ballroom dresses, the men cool and confident in gloves, white ties, and tails.

She removed the plastic and ever so carefully placed the disk in the drive. Like everything else in the house, it was on its last legs. She prayed it wouldn't give out now. A soft click and rattling noises, like a key unlocking a double-barred door, rewarded her entreaty.

She lay back on her bed and softly whispered, "What do you have for me?"

A gentleman in historical garb bowed to her. "And what would m'lady like tonight?"

"Oh, something elegant, and chic and wonderfully romantic."

He turned toward double doors. "Would this dress please m'lady?"

She saw herself come through the door in a blue silk gown studded with jewels. Blond hair fell in ringlets to creamy bare shoulders.

"Oh, yes." She melted. Suddenly she was wearing the dress. Twirling, she luxuriated in the soft rustle of silk, the tapping of her slippers on the cool marble floor. Breathless, she swirled to a halt. With a nod from the gentleman, she centered herself before the ballroom doors and enjoyed the sway of the dress as she regally stepped off the distance to the entrance.

Eddie wondered why it was taking the computer so long. Was he that hard to match up? The kids at school called him weird. Even with all the computer knew about everyone in town, couldn't it find someone to ...

He stood in a magnificent, wood-paneled ballroom. Above him a crystal chandelier flickered with real candles. Their glow reflected off the white marble floor. Mouth hanging open, Eddie laughed at the sheer size of the room as he turned to take it all in. It was wonderful, exciting. He was Marco Polo discovering alien lands.

Then he pulled up short. Couples were pairing up for a dance. The orchestra seemed about to start. His stomach did a flip as if he were halfway down the best water slide in the world only to see Jaws waiting below.

"Hold it. I can't dance, especially not like this."

"Don't worry, Eddie, I'll show you how."

"You'll stay with me?"

"Yes, Eddie. Don't worry." The gentle confidence in her voice sounded so reassuring. He could almost believe her.

"Well, who do I dance with?" He put hands on his hips and looked around, as if expecting to find the voice hanging from the rafters. "These people look ancient enough to be my folks. Where'd you get them, some old movie?" Eddie knew he was trying to cover up how scared he was by being belligerent. The counselor at school warned him about this, but he couldn't help himself.

"Turn around, Eddie."

He did.

"Wow!"

Standing at the head of a gold-carpeted staircase was a girl. She looked to be about his age, but she filled out that low-cut dress something great. With a calm aplomb that took his breath away, she glided down the stairs. Her dress awayed ever so gently with each hidden step she took. Her eyes held Eddie. Then she smiled. Her radiant beauty dazzled him. In one instant, all questions about what lay beneath the dress slipped from his consciousness.

Eddie licked his lips, swallowed hard, and forgot his name. He stood frozen. He knew he looked stupid, and as soon as he opened his mouth, he'd sound dumb.

"How do I get out of here?" he mumbled to himself.

"Now, Eddie, you just got here. Why would you want to leave?" The voice seemed to resound through the room.

"Not so loud," he snapped. "She'll hear you."

"No, she won't. What you and I say is between us two."

"It is?" He looked up toward the vaulted ceiling. Where was that voice?

"Yes. Now why do you want to leave?"

She sounded so logical and definite, like his mom. Well, she wasn't. Why not blurt it all out? "I'm scared. She's beautiful. I'm going to do something stupid."

"Do you think maybe she thinks you're handsome and is just as scared as you are?"

Eddie started. Now that was a thought. "She does? She is? Really?"

"She bought the program like you. She's running it, like you. Now, what should you do?"

Eddie's mind raced. This place reminded him of something he'd seen on TV. "Uh, in the movies, the guy bows."

"Try it."

He did.

At the foot of the stairs, Melinda had just recovered from the shock of discovering the awesomely handsome young man in front of her was real, not a part of the simulation. Then he bowed, and her heart was racing again.

"What do I do now?" Panic rose to swamp her.

"I believe you curtsy," the proper English gentleman's voice advised her. "They do it in all the movies."

"I know. How do you curtsy in this get-up?"

"Oh, of course." A miniature figurine of herself materialized to her right. The dress went transparent so she could see its legs, and she watched it curtsy. That was when she realized she didn't have on any underwear. She flushed. Then she got mad. "This is my dream, what do you mean turning me into some kind of, of ..."

"But ladies' underthings had not been invented when these dresses were in fashion, and I am told that it is most sensuous dancing without ..." The calm voice quit trying to answer the question she had not asked.

Melinda spun, hunting with a vengeance for the unhelpful voice. "I put up with this kind of shit every day from the boys on the block. They're always sniffing around me, trying to see up my dress, feel me up. I don't need any computer to make me meat on some hunk's shopping list. Get me out of here."

"I beg your pardon. I'm terribly sorry about this mistake." Even as the voice spoke in haste, Melinda saw hose and panties appear at the waist of the figurine and felt the secure comfort of them at her waist.

"Fine, now you straighten this out." She cast an angry glance over her shoulder at the boy. "Why should I waste time with a little twerp who'd set me up like this. Get me something that behaves itself."

The gentleman materialized in place of the figurine that had sparked her anger. "We apologize for any discomfort our shortsightedness has caused you. The matter of the underthings was a product of the simulation. The young man had nothing to do with it."

"He didn't?" Melinda reddened with embarrassment. "But how was I to know. I mean ..." She looked over her shoulder. The boy did look cute. He didn't swagger like the boys in the neighborhood. He seemed like a nice guy. Melinda tasted regret that she would never know him. After her carrying on, why would he want to meet her? She let a long breath escape. The room yawned empty, offering nothing. Why did everything with boys always end so badly? She began the long trudge back up the stairs, hope a nipped bud, bruised petals falling with every step.

The proper Englishman stepped in front of her, bowed. "The simulation has not admitted the young man to this scene." His raised eyebrow pleaded softly. "He has only seen you smiling." Again he bowed and vanished away.

Melinda stopped, staring up into the vaulted ceiling. Was there a chance that somewhere in the vast emptiness of the room there might be something, someone for her? Could she save a fragment? After all, she reminded her-

self, this was a computer simulation. If he was a twit, she could say the word and be out of here. She smiled at her forgetfulness, turned, and curtsied.

Eddie recovered from his bow and stood frozen, worshipping this beauty before him. When at last she curtsied, he grinned.

"I've never danced before," he offered by way of an advance apology as he gave her his arm. "This may get interesting."

She looked up at him and put her arm in his. "Neither have I. I bet it does."

Coached by their secret voices, they joined in the waltz. Footsteps appeared on the floor for them to follow, helping them move to the gentle beat of this genteel music. The computer made allowances for Melinda's tiny room. The two never knew as they danced around the ballroom that their steps covered so small a space. Slowly, as one waltz followed another, the muscles of their legs grew accustomed to the steps. The neuron paths of their brains learned the motions.

Wow, Eddie thought, I'm dancing. I haven't done anything stupid and I'm dancing.

Melinda laid her head back and laughed. She dreaded dances. The pawing boys, the mixing of her wants and fears, left her longing to join the wall-flowers and terrified of being unchosen. Tonight, none of the other dancers paid them any attention. The young man was a gentleman. This was wonderful.

Less and less, the computer simulated the gracefulness the two youths had longed for. As practice bred familiarity, the two gained a poise and elegance they had only dreamed of.

"You're getting pretty good at the waltz, Eddie," the enchanted voice complimented him.

"You think so?" Eddie preened, wanting to believe it.

Launch Your Own Fight for Literacy

The recession — we won't use that D word — has caused hardships everywhere. Local community budgets, fire and police departments, schools, health care, and poverty programs are all facing cutbacks as the recession continues — not just here in Massachusetts, but all across the country.

Local libraries are on the front line for budget cuts.

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If your collection's too precious to part with, then you could buy your public library, or local high school library a magazine subscription or two.

It's tax-deductible, and a magazine is a terrible thing to waste. — Ed.

"What do you think?" The voice encouraged him to answer for himself.

"Yeah." He grinned, breathing deeply, inhaling strength and confidence and power, a mouse growing a lion's mane.

"Would you like to try something else?"

"What could we do?" Eddie was enjoying himself. Maybe for the first time in his life he was having fun with a girl. He'd rather flunk his next Chemistry test than spoil this. But maybe there was more.

"What about a round dance?"

"Let me ask her."

"Fine."

"Would you like to try a different kind of dance?" Eddie didn't want to risk losing what he had. But if the girl was game, so was he. It took her a moment to answer.

"Yes. I think it would be fun to try something different."

And so, steps appeared for a round dance. They went from partner to partner, always following the footsteps, and always, somehow, ending facing each other. They laughed a lot, enjoying themselves without the painful self-consciousness of adolescence. And whenever they were at a loss for words, their voices were there as sound-ing boards, coaching when the world got too scary.

Behind them, the clock chimed nine times. **B**"This is a school night. The limits of this simulation have been reached." It was not their voices, but the computer that brought them to a halt as a dance ended. Both sighed.

"Do you want to walk her to the door, Eddie?" The lady's voice offered him an out, the answer he was seeking to stretch the evening, to keep its glow alive for a few more moments.

"Can I?"

"There's time. There's a carriage waiting for her. Don't tell her, though. It's a surprise."

Eddie took her hand. "Let me walk you to the door. It's been an excellent evening. They've got to let us end it right."

"It has been a glorious evening. I've never had one like it."

The voices were quiet now. There was no need for them.

"Do you think we could do it again? I mean, would you like it if we could?"

Melinda needed no time to reflect. "Oh, yes. I would love it. Do you think we can?"

"I bet if we dialed in about the same time and asked for each other they'd connect us."

"Yes, we would." Two separate voices answered one question from both of the youths.

The two youngsters reached the doors. They turned to each other.

"I'm Edward Hastey. I'll call tomorrow at eight. It's Friday, date night. They've got to let us have more time." He spoke quickly.

"My name is Melinda Smith." She was breathless in her haste, fearful the computer would disconnect her before she finished. "I'll be here at eight. But I can't stay too late. Saturday mornings I clean where my mom works. We need the money." She finished lamely as the world impinged on fantasy.

But he didn't seem bothered by her admission. Instead, a big grin spread across Edward's face. She turned to see

what he found amusing. In front of them, across a broad driveway encircling a fountain, four white horses drew an open carriage complete with liveried servants.

She clapped her hands and squealed with glee. Edward beamed.

The coach pulled up to them and halted. Footmen dismounted and placed a step for her, but Edward would let none of them help her to her seat. This he did himself, smoothing her dress in place as she sat.

Tears gleamed in Melinda's eyes as the coach drew off. She tried to remember how the Queen of England did it as she waved to Edward until the coach drove out of sight.

Eddie waved the coach down the driveway, only stopping after it disappeared.

"Well, Eddie, quite a night, wasn't it?"

Beside him stood the woman from the picnic, clothed in a red brocade dress as fancy as Melinda's.

"It was wonderful," he breathed with a sigh, then he got an idea. "You're dressed?"

"Yes," she said, as an eyebrow arched, "and don't you even think of making my gown disappear."

One glance at her and he immediately repented the thought. He looked back to the trees, trying to catch a glimpse of the carriage. "I've never had an evening that was so excellent."

"You and Melinda did it all by yourselves." Eddie's computer godmother smiled.

"Melinda was a lot of fun." Eddie spoke slowly, remembering everything they'd said and done, letting the memories roll over the tip of his tongue like chocolate. They tasted good. "I've been in simulations before. Gone on campaigns with other kids, even a few girls. But they were never like this."

Eddie paused. Grown-ups usually wanted to tell him something about this time in a talk. This woman just smiled and nodded. It felt good to have someone listening to him. He ventured on. "I usually get mad after a while and quit those things."

"Why's that, Eddie?"

"They're always telling you what to do and how to do it." Eddie warmed to the topic. "I mean, like last time. I had to kill a dragon. They kept telling me I was doing it wrong. When they finally told me what I should have done, I didn't see any difference from that and what I'd thought up myself."

She nodded. "I bet that really made you mad."

"It sure did. They're all like that." Eddie stopped. "All except you. You were there when I needed you. You gave me ideas, but you didn't make me do anything." He smiled. "You were nice. You let me and Melinda have a good time."

"Yes, we did, Eddie, but you two did most of it. We helped with an idea or two, but it was you being yourselves that made it fun." She turned to him, folding her hands across the satin waist of her dress, and looked kind of sad. "It's a quarter past nine. Come back tomorrow?"

"Will I see you?"

"You bet. Sweet dreams."

Her good-bye lingered in Eddie's ears as he had the house computer turn out the lights. Snuggling under the covers, hugging his pillow close, he felt a lone tear drift down his cheek to lose itself on the sterile white linen. It had been a long time since anyone had wished him sweet dreams. He'd forgotten how good it felt. □



V is for Vulture

By Ann K. Schwader

Art by Carol Heyer

They were losing this one, no matter what she did. Too deep a gash, internal injuries ... and a No Admit victim. No insurance, no hospital. She'd checked the monitor coming in, but any paramed worth her pay still had to believe in her team. Had to hope this time streetmed would be enough.

Even when it almost never was.

"He won't stabilize, Cheryl." Ali, the team's newest member, looked up from his bandaging with pain in his eyes. "I thought 200 cc's would do it for anybody ..."

Cheryl bit back a curse. The lifesigns monitor in Ali's ear wasn't telling him anything she hadn't already heard from her own. Before the antishock she'd administered could kick in, he'd be gone.

He and the crowd of CitVids this stabbing had attracted. Did she always have to work with an audience?

Even with the police barricades up, she could still feel their cameras on her, drinking in everything. Her patient's heartbeat faltered, picked up again ... and dropped. Cheryl pushed her earset's gain to max. Still something there, just barely. Just enough to seep blood through Ali's foamed-on bandage, over what used to be a human abdomen.

Which was now a hemorrhaging mess.

And half the CitVids had it all on tape.

Trying to ignore them didn't help. She could still hear them in every faltering blip of the monitor. Grabbing a sponge, she mopped her patient's forehead and glared at the glass eyes focused there.

"Damn vultures," Ali muttered. His bandage foam was leaking pink.

Vultures was too clean, but Cheryl kept her mouth shut. No use upsetting the new kid any further. CitVids, like No Admit streetmed, were a fact of life.

And death.

"Cheryl ...?"

The kid's eyes were dark and silent, echoing the silence of her own monitor. Cheryl yanked the earpiece.

"Show's over," she said, loud enough for the CitVids to hear. Reaching for a blanket, she covered the body and raised its gurney. Ali and the rest of her team headed for the liftvan's loading doors.

The sea of glass eyes started turning off, turning away. All but one.

That one — no, him — tracked her like a rifle as she tagged the day's third No Admit fatality. Cheryl tried not to stiffen. One CitVid wasn't much trouble. It was that crowd that drained your energy, destabilized your patients and tipped them toward death.

Ali was right. *Vultures*.

"Scuse me a minute," she told the kid as he closed the van doors. "We've got problems."

Her white tunic caught the breeze as she walked, but that cooling wasn't enough. By the time she reached the CitVid (still wearing his focus goggles, still taping), her

temper'd reached critical.

"Do you *mind*? This isn't a news event anymore, not even by your so-called standards ..."

His focus goggles threw her anger back at her, black mirrors. Cheryl shoved one hand over his camera lens.

"Not on the glass, dammit!"

Even cussing, the CitVid's voice held an edgy music. Cheryl backed off and frowned. Not at all what she'd expected — but then, what could you expect from a Net scavenger?

"Take off the goggles, then," she finally said. "I want to talk to you."

He hesitated, then disconnected a patchcord from the camera clamped to his shoulder. His eyes behind the goggles were intensely green, startling against brown skin.

"Geno Blond," the CitVid said. "And you're ... Cheryl something. Cheryl what?"

Thanks loads, Ali.

"Cheryl Wynn." Where had she seen that look before? "I'm sick to death of you people, especially when we lose somebody. You just can't leave it alone, can you?"

Doubt flickered in the green eyes.

"No, we can't." His voice was low and serious. "The Nets wouldn't like that at all. After a while, we don't, either."

Cheryl's breath caught. *Addiction*. She'd seen eyes like his on chem rescues, victims so dusted on gawd knew what that they didn't even care they were dying ...

"That's your problem," she said. "Not mine. Mine is saving No Admits, doing streetmed some doctor should do but none of them will. It's just me and my team and you vultures — and the vultures keep winning!"

Geno's expression didn't change.

"It's not enough that somebody died," she went on. "You had to get every last moment. And for what?"

Still no answer.

Cheryl felt her fists clench. "I just can't believe you. Haven't you got anything to say for yourself?"

His eyes focused hard on her then. Tracked her like twin cameras.

"Maybe," he finally said. "How does 'Are you free tonight for dinner' sound?"

The place was about three times more expensive than anywhere she'd ever eaten. Smoothing her skirt, Cheryl took a deep breath and forced herself to ask the obvious question.

"Why?"

Green eyes met hers across an arrangement of real wax candles. "Why what? Can't I ask a beautiful woman to dinner?"

Sure you can. But you didn't.



CAROL
MEYER

Cheryl knew she wasn't bad looking — strawberry blonde, mid-thirties, decent figure — but that wasn't what this dinner was about. She'd been trying to pin down his real motives all day, and she couldn't.

Maybe she didn't want to.

"More wine?"

The vintage was excellent, pre-Quake California. Cheryl still shook her head. Geno poured for himself, sipped, and frowned at her.

"What's the problem? Did I lay it on too thick?"

"Just a little." *Careful, girl.* "I mean, we didn't exactly meet under ideal circumstances ..."

"Maybe I find you interesting."

His eyes said he meant it. The way his camera meant it? Cheryl glanced at his shoulder, half-expecting to see it still clamped there. Even without that glass eye, his own were intense enough.

Flattery. Raw flattery.

She poured herself wine and sipped it, feeling clearer. How interested was he in Cheryl Wynn as a person? So long as she kept that question in mind, they'd be all right. And the wine was very good.

Unfortunately, it couldn't help her ignore Geno's attentiveness. Part of her kept being flattered, though she knew damn well what *CitVids* used parameds for. *Contacts.* She'd seen other liftvan teams wearing those pagers, and it made her sick. A team focused on money wasn't together, wasn't doing its job ...

Sure, the money was good. One commission for a hot leadtape paid better than a month's city salary. The Nets loved their scavengers, and those scavengers spread the wealth — into dinners like this one. Hard to remember No Admits now, those loser faces and messy deaths ...

Cheryl put down the wineglass.

"Look," she said, "you don't have to do this. I know streetmed tape makes the ratings go crazy, but I don't want to play. That's not why I have dinner with someone."

Geno's thin hands clenched on the table, wrinkling the linen cloth.

"That wasn't my motive .. or maybe it was. I don't know any more." He rubbed his camera shoulder. "Sometimes the lens sees for me, chooses what I look at. *Who* I look at, even with the goggles off."

Are they ever?

Candlelight touched their faint indentations in his face: addiction marks blatant as hypo bruises. Cheryl looked away. She'd been rescuing addicts for fifteen years. Why had she never noticed the ones outside the baricades?

"You really can't stop, can you?" she asked quietly.

"Why should I?" He smiled a little into the light.

But his eyes said "No."

"It's all a question of product," he said, pouring himself more wine. "Tape is product, and Nets wolf it like a kid eats candy. Nobody's running a real news staff. Half the 'news' you see is *CitVid* tape, and the public loves it — no reenactments, no reconstructions cut to some private agenda. Just some honest citizen, on the spot with a camera at the right time ..."

He reached for the glass. Half-drained it.

"You and I and the Nets know better," he said, "but the ratings don't. Straight product's not enough anymore. The Nets want sensation; the more color, the better."

No need to ask what color he meant. She washed it off

her hands every day.

And his eyes still followed her, consciously or not.

It felt a little like doing streetmed for the glass audience. Energy bled out of her, into green eyes and the camera they fed twenty-four hours now ... but she wasn't fighting it. Energy was excitement. Geno needed that excitement, found *her* exciting for whatever reason.

Maybe she knew that reason. Maybe neither of them did. Work and exhaustion and No Admits were part of life, but they didn't have to be all of hers.

Not when two of the eyes watching out there were green.

Cheryl poured herself vodka. Double vodka with an excuse of OJ, no more. She considered calling her mother, but not while the pain was this fresh. Five No Admits today, four fatalities.

And too much damn tape.

Surprise, surprise.

Her first sip went down bitter, despite the fresh juice. Geno had insisted on buying. In the month since he'd moved in, he'd introduced luxuries her salary'd never heard of: natural fruit juice, hot showers, decent liquor.

Especially the liquor. She needed it, lately.

Trying to forget why, Cheryl took another long sip. Out in the living room, something buzzed at the threshold of her hearing. Something familiar. Whirling, she nearly dropped her drink — and caught Geno staring from the couch, focus goggles guiding the camera on his shoulder.

This had ceased to be flattering weeks ago.

"Can't you do that somewhere else, for gawdsakes?"

Kicking aside an empty box of Hunan takeout, Geno sat up and grinned.

"Just practicing. I think you've got real docudram potential, though. Liftvan tape's getting cheap lately, but personal profiles ..."

Cheryl took a deep breath, pushing away panic.

"Right," she said, sipping her Screwdriver cautiously.

"Mind telling me how many other women you've used that line on?"

"Zingo." Geno's mouth quirked. "Seriously, Cheryl. What you do out there every day is drama, and you look great doing it. That chem case today was *nova*!"

Her next sip went down the wrong way. Coughing, Cheryl looked at her belt pager with disgust.

"Nova? She died, Geno!"

"Plenty of No Admits do. It's not your fault."

Remembering a girl's contorted face, Cheryl turned away. How many deaths for her team, lately? How many since she and Geno...? The vodka was helping, but not enough. She could still feel strength draining out of her — and her patients.

Her right ear pulsed echoes of a failing heart. Shaking her head to clear it, she headed into the living room.

"Ali was wrong," she said. "*CitVids* aren't vultures. Vultures only take what's already dead, but *CitVids* — all of you — feed off *life*!"

Silence for a moment from the couch.

"You may be right," Geno finally said. "Hell, I know you are."

"Then why don't you...?"

Turning, she saw the goggles still on his face. The camera still tracking. She crossed the room in four long strides, yanked the camera off his shoulder and popped



LAUREN EYER

the tape cassette.

It cracked like a hardshelled insect under her heel.

Geno didn't try to stop her. Removing his goggles carefully, he laid them aside. Then he reached for a container of fried rice and the room's screen remote.

"Watch," he told her as the screen filled with action and color. "Just watch for a while."

Cheryl kicked the dead cassette under a chair and sat down. She recognized the Net logo: Geno's favorite, his best customer. It was running CitVid tape as usual, an accident in one of the city's bullet tunnels.

"Watch with your mind open," he said between bites. "Try and understand what this means to me. How it feels to be there, touching and not touched, taking it all in ..."

Even without the camera, he was focusing on her. Cheryl squirmed, almost wishing the goggles had stayed on.

The Net images pulled at her like an undertow.

"I've got enough thrills in my life," she said, raising her voice over three liftvans landing in formation. "My team saves lives every day — or we try to, at least. That's where the excitement is."

"I don't need a reality filter to make it feel good."

Geno's eyes flicked away for a moment.

"Are you sure?"

He got up from the couch, took the glass from her hand. "This is a reality filter," he said, dumping the last of her Screwdriver into a plant. "What I do ... is what really works. Keep watching."

After the day she'd had, it was easier not to argue. The bullet tunnel accident ended, and another tape began after a few remarks from an anchorwoman. A stabbing, this time; like the one a month ago.

"Your product?" she asked, already knowing it was.

"Mmm-hmm." His eyes were following camera angles.

"Watch the colors, Cheryl: the blood, the torn clothing, the flesh underneath. It's all just color to the camera, pigment on tape. It's not real — and it is."

The police were lifting the body now, smearing their gloves. Cheryl forced herself to recognize what the darkening-red substance actually was.

It was harder than she expected.

"Nothing can touch you when you're working," Geno said. "Not the law inside the barricades. Not the victims. All you've got to worry about are your Net and your audience."

Cheryl tried not to listen. She was very tired, and the smell of Human food knotted her stomach. "All the thrills and none of the pain, you mean?"

"Something like that."

His eyes moved away from the screen, noting lines in her face. Lines of fifteen years in streetmed, No Admits, and death.

The police took the body away. Geno's camera panned over the crowd, finding interesting foci: flame anger, pale shock, glittering tears. Pigment on tape.

And no lines in his face. None like hers, anyway.

Geno blanked the screen and curled one arm around her. "Caring the way you do isn't worth it," he said. "It tears you up, wears you out ... gives back zero. All the camera wants is product."

"Product's easier."

Not trusting herself to answer, Cheryl shrugged off Geno's arm and stood up. If she didn't get some real sleep

soon, she'd be worse than useless tomorrow.

Geno watched her, frowning.

"I really think you should try it my way sometime," he said quietly. "Give the heart on your sleeve a rest."

Cheryl stiffened and turned away.

"Maybe I should just tear it off and sell it to the Nets."

After a few moments, the apartment door opened and closed. It happened a lot lately, though she wondered where he went. Geno had no friends she knew of, only contacts.

Cheryl headed back to the kitchen for a refill, trying to ignore his camera beside the couch. *Reality filters*, she thought. *Blinders for glass eyes*.

But his focus goggles fit just fine.

Ali's hands were tense on the van's controls, skin shading white over the knuckles. Double-checking her kit for landing, Cheryl wished she had time to calm the kid — but she didn't. Not with the site glowing on their heads-up screen: 16TH ST BULLET TUNNEL/AOR.

At Own Risk was a gamble nobody took if they could afford not to, an ugly compromise with the cop shortage. AOR on a route meant no police assigned. No immediate help if one of a half-dozen metro Packs took advantage of the situation.

About half the city's bullet riders found alternate transportation on AOR days. Another quarter or so just stayed home. The rest, too poor to pay lift fares and too desperate to risk their jobs, rode anyway.

Hoping their numbers didn't come up.

"Landing in three minutes, Cheryl." Ali's voice shook a little. "Two other vans inbound, but Dispatch says that's not enough. Not according to police, anyway."

Cheryl loaded her last dose of antishock and closed her kit. *Damn*. Everybody knew 16th Street was Tox territory, and what Toxics did to their victims ... i.e., those unlucky enough to ride the 4:45 this afternoon.

Even before Ali brought them down, she knew this lift would be bad. Unlike most Packs, the Tox had a few hi-techs — and one had managed to short out the rail between stops. Easy enough after that to swarm the compartments, taking whatever — and whomever — they wanted, having fun with the rest.

One of the few escapees had called police, but the fifteen-minute response lag meant there wouldn't be much to save. Most of that would be No Admits.

She was wondering how not to page Geno when he paged her.

"On my way," his voice crackled through the box on her belt. "Sounds like first-class product. Sorry 'bout your commission this time, but another contact ..."

Cheryl cut him off.

"Forget the money — this site's not safe. Police say they're securing it, but you know the Tox. You don't want to be here yet."

Silence on the pager. Silence of dead air.

"Oh, hell," she muttered.

"One minute, Cheryl."

Ali's jaw tightened as he circled to give them all a good look. Police barricades were already up, a dozen casualties laid out away from the tunnel entrance. Two wore poison green and black, Tox colors. The others looked worse: knuckleblade slashes, slug wounds, caustics.

CitVids clustered outside the barricades, tracking two

cops bringing up another gurney. Cursing, Cheryl yanked off her pager and dropped it on the floor.

No time for Geno's problems now.

A police sergeant in riot gear waved them down and met Cheryl as she crawled through the van's back door. His chestplate was smeared with blood.

"We think we've got things secured," he said, "but keep your heads down. Crits laid out to your right, everybody else to your left."

Cheryl motioned two of her team to start triage.

"Any idea what the Admit status is on any of these? If we've got to notify hospitals ..."

The sergeant shook his head. "Typical AORs." He sounded exhausted. "Hundred-percent No Admits, an' all the stretched in the city couldn't ... sorry, Ma'am. Glad you came."

Cheryl got to work fast, trying to forget how right he probably was. Her first case, a young girl, had caustic burns on her face and the usual trauma lower down. Grabbing a hypo of antishock, she pressed it to the first large vein that she could find. When Ali handed her a lifesigns monitor, her hands shook putting it in.

Outside the barricade, glass eyes watched hungrily. Geno was one of them; she could feel it.

The monitor said her patient did, too.

"Block for me," she told Ali quietly. "Keep yourself between her and as many of the CitVids as you can. Let 'em get their leadtape somewhere else ..."

Shots cracked a few meters behind them. Cheryl kissed pavement and watched the helpful sergeant go down, knocked back by a hi-cal slug. Beyond him, just inside the barricade, two over-ambitious CitVids had already crumpled.

One of them was Geno.

"Cheryl, get out!"

Ali was halfway to the van, zigzagging for his life. Most of her team was there already. She waited a moment, then followed. Nothing else to do now; only cops got paid to be heroes.

Nobody eats hi-cals and lives. Not without armor.

Biting her lip hard, she locked the van's back door and checked the one patient already loaded. He was dusted solid on synth-morphine, which was about all anybody could do. The monitor still stuck in her ear didn't sound good up close.

Pretty soon it didn't sound at all.

Geno.

She knew what she'd find, but she had to check anyway. After covering the body, she eased her way back. Nobody stopped her. Whatever they might have thought about her and Geno, her team was still a unit ... a unit too accustomed to grief.

"Be careful," Ali whispered as she slipped outside.

The police sergeant was up again, a major dent in his chestplate. Something bloody and black and poison green had been dumped beside the other Tox casualties. Glancing away, Cheryl headed for Geno.

Another lifteam was already there, tagging bodies. Its leader spotted the badge on her tunic and motioned her closer.

"Someone you knew?" he asked quietly, following her eyes.

Cheryl nodded. The Tox hi-techs had done it again: Geno's chest wound looked more like impact shrapnel

than a standard slug hit. Most of his left shoulder was gone.

On his right, the clamped-on camera still whirled.

Staring at that blind glass eye, Cheryl nearly choked. It was all in her face now, all the blood and death and stupid suffering a few extra cops might have prevented.

Geno's focus goggles stared back at her. Drew her down like black water, cool and painless.

The other team leader touched her shoulder. "We've got to load," he said, not meeting her eyes. "If the Tox hit us again ..."

Stooping to Geno's body, Cheryl removed both goggles and camera. "Understood." *Do I understand anything?* "I'll log these in when we get back to Dispatch."

It wasn't procedure, but he let her go. She headed back to her own van at a dead run, fighting the shakes. How long had she been walking through this, eyes carelessly open?

Ali opened the back door for her. Crawling inside, Cheryl eased herself down and slipped on Geno's goggles with uncertain hands.

How it feels to be there, touching and not touched ...

The camera clamped to her shoulder now. The patchcord linking her into glass vision that saw without pain. Activating the unit's base controls, she felt her nerves ease.

Color to the camera. Pigment on tape.


Outside, more shots. The thin scream of one of her team's casualties, the bark of a police carbine dropping another Tox gunman. Taking a deep breath, Cheryl looked out the back of the van. The camera panned with her glance, sweeping lightly over the blood and fresh death and hopelessness.

Filtering out the hurt of caring.

Feeding her.

□

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A Sense of Sharing

By Leonard Rysdyk

Art by Larry Blamire

Maybe he had fallen asleep with the TV on, or maybe he had just stopped paying attention. In either case, the next thing he saw was a shot of a bar at a beach resort where a man was whispering in the ear of a blonde model who was holding a drink with an umbrella in it. She tossed her head and laughed. Her shoulders were beautiful, with little muscles rippling under her peaches-and-cream skin. Her hair was short and her breasts were bare, but they were hidden by the graceful way she held the glass in her prosthetic hands.

Uncle Sam's face filled the screen, but instead of his traditional top hat, he wore a red, white, and blue bandage. He pointed his plastic finger at the camera and asked, "Did you do your part?"

"I'm afraid," Larry said as he got into bed next to Lynne. Her dark hair lay in curls on the pillow.

"That's only natural," she said. "I was, too." She turned off the lights as he settled himself. She had her back to him, but he could smell her skin, her perfume and soap. A hint of polyurethane.

"That makes it worse," he said. "You had the courage to do it and I don't." He lay on his back, his head deep in the soft pillow. The scalloped ceiling came into focus as his eyes adjusted to the dark.

"No one can tell you what's right, Larry," Lynne turned her head slightly to speak over her shoulder. "You put in a whole year at the fire-control center. And all those weekends volunteering. Every Christmas we wrapped packages for the USO. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

Larry listened to the ventilator as the house breathed.

"I wouldn't want to give a piece of my body to just anyone ... you know, a stranger," he said.

"Jimmy Petrovsky needs a forearm. He's got two prosthetics and he's paralyzed below the waist. His parents were in our bowling league before the war. He's not a stranger."

Larry felt the pillowed cotton of his pajama top lie soft along his arms, both of them, all the way down to his wrists. He felt his legs, not as strong as they had once been, a little stiff from sitting at his terminal all day, but his, alive and connected to his central nervous system. He had been a runt of a kid, too frail for football, too skinny to look good on the beach. What a revelation when he finally believed that Lynne liked — loved — his skinny body. He reached over and took her hand. It was hard and cold. She squeezed his hand gently, her joints giving a little squeak as she moved. He wiggled his toes. And felt guilty as hell.

"It's not like you're never going to get it back," Nick said. He pried the plastic lid off his coffee cup and blew away the steam. "I know a guy who got all his fingers back already. Okay, the recipient died in an accident and that's

a tragedy, but the point is, it's a temporary condition."

"I know," said Larry. "Let me carry that for you."

"No, I have to learn to adjust to this leg. Not just walking, in everything."

"Does Thea mind ... you know, in bed?" Larry asked. The white paper bag that held his danish and orange juice crunched as he walked.

"Hell, no," said Nick. "It's twice, three times a night, same as usual. Couldn't be better."

"Oh," Larry said. They waited for the elevator. "You know I want to." The lobby of the Consolidated Life Insurance building filled up with people.

"I know," said Nick, blowing and sipping. "When the time is right, you will. And you know somebody is going to need you."

"Imagine spending your life unable to feel, to touch?"

"Man, this prosthesis has given me a whole new appreciation of my natural leg."

"I can imagine," Larry said.

"It's not the pain that's bothering you, is it?" said Nick.

"No."

"Cause, there's no pain; they've got the drugs down perfect. I mean, they treat you like a god on pension. It's an ego boost, I tell you. And the recipient, is he grateful! I can't tell you how good I feel about it."

The express elevator came.

"Won't see you 'till next week," Nick said. He stepped on the elevator.

"Troubleshooting in Boston?"

"Something else," Nick said. "Gotta do my part. Say hi to Lynne."

Maybe it would be easier if you went to visit a clinic." Lynne was taking plates out of the microwave; Larry was folding napkins. "You can get familiar with the surroundings, see how concerned the doctors are."

"And talk to the patients," Larry nodded. "Maybe."

The hospital was set up for such visits. Larry and two other prospective donors, a man with a paunch and a young woman who wore a ring in her nose, waited a few moments for a PR woman to lead them on a tour. Larry sat on the orange plastic sofa and flipped through a magazine. He didn't like the hospital smell or the sound the nurses' shoes made on the linoleum tile floors: something between a shush and a squeak, something just plain creepy.

"This is my second time," the paunchy man said.

"Huh?" said Larry.

"The first time, the hospital wouldn't take me. Odd size, they said." He waved his stubby arms to demonstrate. "I hear they can't get enough nowadays, so I came back. Take a chance."



"You mean you want to give a limb?"

The punk girl looked at him sharply as if he had suggested something evil, like burning the flag.

"Oh, yes, of course," the fat man said. "I saw those poor boys on TV with no arms or legs, some without anything from the waist down. First, I couldn't imagine what kept them alive. Then I couldn't imagine not helping them. What misery. Thank God for medical science."

"Thank God," Larry said.

"I lost my son," the man said. He put a hand over his eyes. "Secondary radiation effects in Brazil, Costa del Sol. His lungs filled up with fluid." The punk girl reached over and touched his shoulder.

"I lost my husband," she said. "Claymore mine in Arceibo. Nothing left of him. Nothing." Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Larry shifted in his seat. His family had fallen into the cracks, either too young or too old to be placed at risk; the same had been true for his friends. He knew of people — distant relatives, acquaintances, neighbors' children — who had lost family. He hadn't realized until that moment how untouched by the war he had been.

The public relations woman nodded grimly when she came into the waiting room and saw the two people weeping.

"It happens a lot," she said. "We understand. Come on; I'll show you how much good you'll be doing."

She led them through swinging doors marked "Sympathetic Transplants," and the atmosphere of the hospital changed. Fluorescent ceiling fixtures were replaced by cut-glass sconce lamps set in fabric-covered walls. The bare floors were covered with thick carpets patterned with blue squares. In the corners of each square, a severed limb held a surgical instrument in its fingers or toes; in the center of each square was a whole man holding a caduceus. Everyone who passed smiled.

The public relations woman led them to a balcony overlooking an operating theater. As Larry watched, the floor below moved. One table slid away, and another came before the medical team.

"The procedures are separated and given to specialists," the PR woman said. "Here, the doctors are performing dislocations. This team only does arms, as you see. They work one hour on, one hour off, for an eight-hour day, so they are always fresh. You see how clean everything is. That's because they use a laser scalpel which cauterizes as it cuts. It leaves much less of a scar than a steel knife. There, they've completed another one already." The removed arm was carried off in a tray of ice while final stitches were made on the donor's shoulder. An electric motor hummed, and the floor slid the patient away and another into his place.

"How many do they do each day?" asked the punk girl.

"One every three minutes, eighteen an hour, seventy-two a day. Maybe a few less if there are complications."

Larry opened his mouth to speak, but the tour guide said, "But I suspect you are more interested in patient accommodations." She whisked them away.

The rooms were not like hospital rooms at all. Though there were four beds to a room, each bed was made of wood and laid with patterned sheets which bore the coat of arms Larry had seen on the rugs. The patients were smiling and chatting with relatives and friends who sat in Windsor chairs. Music played softly.

"The patients stay overnight. They could really go right home, they feel so well. But we like to keep an eye on them just in case."

Larry wanted to ask a question again, but the tour guide continued.

"After you leave here, you will be assigned a personal trainer who will come to your home, frequently at first, then less as you need her less. She — most of our coaches are women, but we're recruiting men; we must be fair — will oversee your recovery and make recommendations on diet. But most of all she will help you orient yourself to your prosthesis. In the past, some donors felt a distance from their new limbs, but we have learned to help them think of the prosthesis as part of themselves."

The fat man said, "I've heard there are full-body transplants. For quadraplegics. I've heard there are veterans who are alive, but can't move a muscle, not talk, not bat an eye. They call them" He searched for the words.

"Akinetic mutes?" the woman said.

"Yeah. And ones who have nothing left but a head and neck. Kept alive on machines." He leaned forward on his toes. "Isn't there something we can do to help them?"

The tour guide looked him over. "No," she said. "Some things just aren't practical. For instance, if a veteran received a whole body, who would he be, himself or the donor?"

Larry looked at his companions. They were nodding their heads thoughtfully.

"But there is nothing I can say to reassure you that these brave and selfless donors can't tell you better," said the tour guide. "Why don't you just go talk to them?"

"I don't need to," the paunchy man said. "Sign me up."

"Me, too," said the punk woman.

Larry walked hesitantly into the donors' room and approached a bed. Its occupant smiled and beckoned with a shiny new plastic and aluminum arm.

"You want to know if it hurt, right?" said the man.

"That's what concerned me most — selfish, I know. Well, it didn't. And I don't feel groggy or hyped up on drugs or anything. I don't know what they're using, but it's perfect."

"What about the, ah ... " Larry nodded at the prosthesis.

The man snapped its gripper smartly. "See, I'm used to it already."

Larry nodded. "Okay," he said, "but ... don't you — miss it? I mean, do you feel whole?"

The man looked at Larry. His eyes were dark and he had soft, slightly oily skin that shone in the light. "Sure, I miss it," he said quietly. "But I feel whole. Part of the whole human race. Part of the person I'm helping. Wanna see how I feel? Look over there. Then you'll know how I can give up an arm and still feel whole."

Larry walked slowly across the hall and through a wide doorway into another room, a veteran's. The man was a lump. Two prosthetic legs leaned against the end of the bed. A prosthetic arm held the sheet up to his chest, against a nightshirt that covered his fire-scarred skin. A young woman was standing next to the bed. She was holding the veteran's newly grafted hand.

Larry was drawn forward. "You don't know what — a gift — this is," the patient said. The woman nodded. "Anything. I would do anything for the guy who let me touch my wife again, hold my baby ... If you could ... If you



can"

Larry walked quickly out of the room, but he was met in the corridor by the woman who led the tour. "I hope you feel encouraged," she said. She smiled tightly and held up a clipboard. "I'd like to get the process started right away. We need a blood sample, and it will take a few days for the recipient to grow the monoclonal antibodies to prevent rejection. If you could sign here, I can"

"I'd like to think about it," Larry said.

The woman blinked. "What's to think about?" she said. "You know the need. You see there is nothing to be afraid of."

"I'd just like to get used to the idea."

"Of course," the woman said. She hugged the clipboard to her trim blue blazer. "That's perfectly natural. I don't recall, but did I explain the benefits package that's part of donating? The hospital visit is free, and there's compensation for time lost at work, problems meeting family obligations. We want this to be as easy on you as possible."

"I'll call, real soon," Larry said. He felt queasy, and his knees were starting to shake.

"Of course," the woman said. "If you need time, then you must take it. Before you go, could you give us your phone number? You omitted it on the forms."

Larry wrote in the number. Then, as long as he was there, he decided to give some blood.

When Larry got home, Lynne was out ferrying around the kids. Larry got a beer out of the refrigerator and collapsed in his armchair in the family room. Reflexively, he turned on the TV. The news showed the ongoing demolition of a cathedral in Mexico City as a reporter described plans to build garden apartments on the site for lower- and middle-income citizens who had been made homeless by the war. Then the announcer took a lighter tone and began a human interest story. He introduced Harlan McClain, a skinny, smiling man. Larry turned down the sound. He looked around the room and saw scattered plates left over from the kids' lunch and plants that needed watering. On the screen, Harlan McClain was smiling and waving as he was wheelchaired into a hospital. Larry got up and collected the plates. When he turned back Harlan McClain was smiling but not waving any more. "Sound," Larry said.

"... generously shared all four limbs with needy veterans," said the voice-over. "Congressman Bill O'Donnel is introducing special legislation that will permit such 'penultimate altruism' donors to be eligible for re-attachment in half the time of ordinary donors." Weather and sports came next. Larry brought the plates into the kitchen and told the house to turn off the TV.

The kids came home, dropped off by a neighbor. "Where's your mother?" Larry asked. Gwendolyn sucked air loudly from the empty box of juice she held in her tiny hands. "Bobby?" His son looked up as if he were trying to see through the wave of thick brown hair that fell across his forehead. "Uh, she says she'll be home later and we should start dinner without her."

Lynne came in much later that night. Larry was dozing in front of the TV, as Fred Astaire danced with Ginger Rogers on videotape. Larry didn't have to ask his wife where she had been; he could tell from the sound of her footsteps.

"Why?" he asked. "You gave an arm. You were one of

the first."

"Only from here," Lynne said, pointing with her claw to her remaining elbow.

"You've given enough."

"How can there be enough sharing? Besides, there are people who have done much more, given their whole bodies to people who need them."

"That's not possible." Larry realized he was shouting; he lowered his voice. "They told me so at the hospital."

Lynne said, "I'm tired."

"It's because of me, isn't it?" Lynne didn't answer. "How did you get them to let you out?"

"I told them I was a single mother; I knew they'd think I was a war widow, so they took special care of me. I'm healthy and strong. And I promised them I'd go right to bed."

Gwendolyn must have heard them. She came running down the stairs in her pajamas. "Mommy! Mommy!" she called. She ran to Lynne and hugged her leg, the prosthetic one, then backed away. "Let me see," she said and pulled on Lynne's black trousers. Lynne looked at Larry while she hiked up her pantleg. The prosthetic was pink and new; the metal joints gleamed. "Ooh," said Gwendolyn. "Can I get one of those?"

"No," Larry said.

"We'll see, dear," said Lynne softly. She looked at Larry. "There are a lot of unfortunate children in the world."

The company made it easy to give blood; the clinic was right on the work floor. I could give a kidney, Larry thought as he lay on the donor's table squeezing the rubber bulb. Part of my liver for regrowth. Bone marrow. That's it: tomorrow I'll give a marrow plug. In the morning, so I'll have to limp at work. His blood ran down the clear tube into the bag. He'd given every day that week, though they only let him give one pint at a time. The donation room had the best view, too. Larry could see the Verrazano Bridge between two office towers.

The man on the next table was looking at him. "You must be pretty excited," he said.

"Why?" Larry asked.

"Well, with the donation coming up and all."

"I don't ... How did you know?"

"I just guessed. I'm a vet, you know. This arm," the man said as he nodded at the arm from which blood flowed, "is everything. The hook is okay; I can use it to work. But it doesn't seem real. It doesn't seem me. What with no arms and no legs, just the prostheses, I guess I could do everything I had to do. But I don't think I could bring myself to get out of bed."

Larry nodded.

"Those guys who give their whole bodies, now that's courage," the veteran said.

"Can't be done."

"Sure it can. That's sharing. When those guys get their bodies back, they'll be heroes."

"You think they will?"

"Sure! Statues will go up to 'em. Parades ..."

"No, I mean, get their bodies back? I've never heard of anyone who got a donated limb back."

"They have to give the limbs back. It's the law. The limb's not a gift, it's a loan. It's sharing."

"I know. But would you give your arm back?"

"Sure," the man said quietly.
"And if it were your whole body?"
The man did not answer.

Daddy, daddy, look what I've got." Gwendolyn ran up to him as he came in the door. She was wearing a red and white striped tank top that made it easy to show off her new metal and plastic arm.

"My God," Larry said. He picked Gwendolyn up and hugged her, pressing his nose into her hair. She squirmed. "Daddy, put me down!"

He carried Gwendolyn into the family room where Lynne was poking at the computer. "Why?" he yelled. "Why?"

"Mommy!" Gwendolyn cried out. Larry put her down and she ran to her mother.

"To do our part," Lynne said. "To give, to share. You watch the news, or at least you turn it on. How can you be so selfish?"

"It's unnatural," Larry said. "It's sick to carve yourself up and pass yourself around. I'm not spare parts."

"The war was sick and unnatural," Lynne said. "Sharing is normal and right. It's what makes us different from the animals, Larry. It's what makes us human." She came to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "Why can't you help? Why can't you join in?"

"Because I'm afraid," Larry said softly. He turned away. "Because I'm afraid."

His face was wet. His knees scraped the rug; his hands clutched the sofa cushions. He had lost his balance. Lynne knelt heavily beside him. Her flesh hand touched his hair and her voice was close to him. "Shh," she said, "shh." Gwendolyn crawled on the couch and knelt near enough for him to smell her skin.

"What's wrong with Daddy?" Gwendolyn said.

"There isn't time to be afraid now, Larry," Lynne said. "People need you."

"I know," Larry said. He touched Gwendolyn's small head. "I know."

Larry woke in his armchair. The TV was on but muted: the cavalry was coming to somebody's rescue. A haze covered Larry's eyes; his neck ached and his head hurt. He looked at the clock. 2 a.m. He felt panic rise in his gut. He felt the need to do something. Go on, he thought. Go. Now.

He drove to the hospital automatically. At this hour, there was no traffic to slow him, to distract him from his goal. He parked close to the entry of the clinic. At the reception desk, the nurse already had his name on file, as if he was expected.

"Give me anything," Larry said to the slight, sallow woman. She tapped expertly at the computer with her prosthetic. "I want the first one you've got. Arm, leg. I'll sign right now. Don't make me wait. I'll sign right now, you understand?"

"Of course," the nurse said. "I understand."

Larry didn't even have to be seated. An orderly came out with a wheelchair, and in a moment they were on the coat-of-arms carpet. A nurse put a needle in his arm. She was the prettiest woman Larry had ever seen. "What's your gift going to be?" she asked in a smooth contralto voice. She looked at the chart, then put her hand on his shoulder. "You're very brave." The nurse smiled like a

fashion model. The last thing Larry saw before he went under was that smile and the last thing he heard was the thump of her prosthetic foot as she walked away.

He didn't see anything when he woke up. His skin felt a little numb, and he couldn't move, but he thought that was because of the anaesthetic. He could hear a gentle beep and a hum. A heart monitor, he thought. Then voices. "He's doing fine." Doctors, Larry thought. Larry tried to open his eyes, to reassure the doctor that his diagnosis was right, that Larry was fine, ready to get up, ready to go home to his wife and children. He couldn't move his mouth. He couldn't feel his limbs. He struggled to open his eyes, but couldn't.

A warm feeling crept up Larry's spine. It wasn't the drugs or anything to do with his medical condition. It was an emotional warmth. A sense of well-being. Larry felt warmed by the sense of having done what his family had asked, what everyone wanted. He was warmed by the sense of sharing himself joyously, wantonly, unconditionally with all mankind. Sharing himself as selflessly as an interchangeable part. □

The Amnesia Addict

By Bruce Boston

*Adrift on the River Lethe
where individual histories die
and the past is left behind,
where currents of oblivion
wash away my sin and expiation,
I watch a lover's face crumble
like ancient plaster of Paris.*

*Asflight in the neural storms
where stores of memory ignite
and my soon forgotten life
transpires in swift scenarios
of sweet disintegration,
I rise from the padded table
reshaped by laser knives.*

*Alert ... innocent and refined,
my grandest illusions intact,
my wintry flesh peeled and aglow
in the dewy blush of pubescence,
I embrace each sensation anew,
free to err with blind naïveté
and ride the rush of infatuation.*

*Interminably eager I remain
to reinscribe the tabula rasa
of my skinned and polished soul,
until the dreaded chime of time's
internal clock betrays my age
and scythes my cyclic rebirth
with the Reaper's ultimatum.*

Abstract



In an earlier column I told you in some detail what it is to be a working scientist — the meetings, the paperwork, the generation of view graphs, the phone calls, and on rare occasions the visits to the lab where an attempt might be made to do a little science. The picture that I painted for you was what happens at work. However, there is a big world waiting outside the cloistered confines of Hughes Research Labs of Malibu, California, a world that knows what I'm doing and wants me to report on it.

What am I talking about?

I'll tell you.

It all starts out innocently enough. Between meetings, or after visiting the restroom, I'll stop by my secretary's office (do not be impressed — I share her with thirty other people) and see what might be in my mail slot.

If I'm lucky it will be empty.

I'm rarely lucky.

Usually it has several meeting notices, the announcement of a seminar, junk mail (yes, I get lots of technical junk mail — people wanting to sell me used vacuum pumps, sputtering services, computer programs, advertisements for the Solid State Book-of-the-Month Club, and reams of throwaways from the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers), and then the occasional letter from some university.

Those are the letters that get my attention.

They come from places like Berkeley, MIT, University of Texas at Austin, North Carolina State, or a dozen others. I know what these are before I open them. I've been expecting them. They're just like the swallows returning to Capistrano — you can never quite remember when that special day of

return is, but you know that those birds are out there, flying around, just waiting to drop something on you.

I open up the letter.

It is an *Abstract Announcement*.

In the technical world, you have two sets of people that you deal with — those at the place you work, and those people in the outside world who are doing work similar to yours. I work in the field of Molecular Beam Epitaxy and Solid State Devices. There are probably 10,000 people throughout the world doing research in this field.

And occasionally they want to get together.

They want to know what everyone else is doing.

They want to see who is doing the best, who has the new worlds records, whose devices go the fastest, deliver the most power, and exhibit the strangest phenomena.

Bottom line: it is time for everyone to get ranked, to see who is moving up in the technical world, who has plateaued, and who is on the down-hill side. The abstract announcement is about an upcoming conference, a techno-get-together devoted to something like thin-film growth, compound-semiconductor devices, or ultrafast optical materials. The abstract announcement says if you would like to report your latest gee-whiz results to your colleagues and have those results included in some technical journal, then you've got three or four months to write up a one-page abstract, touching on a few highlights of your work. You are to send it to the conference Chairman, and if it is deemed worthy by the Chairman's program committee, then you will be allowed to present your work.

I think about this as I walk back

to my office.

I know that I *have* to present something. If not, everyone will think that I've lost my technical edge. Word will get around quickly. *Bob Metzger has lost it*, they'll say. *He didn't present anything this year*. Everyone will shake his or her head, look sympathetic, all the while chuckling to him or herself, knowing that I've peaked, that I've probably become a *hack*, relegated to doing *production* work. But it's worse than simply a few colleagues having a tarnished opinion of me. The stuff I present will be *published* in a journal. I *have* to publish. That way the outside world will think well of Hughes Research Labs. The DOD and various funding agencies keep track of this stuff.

No publish — no money.

And without money, without funding, I can't afford to do any more research. And if I can't do research, then I can't report my results at a conference. When I don't show up at the conference next year, those few who still remember me might wonder if I've died. The speculation might center around whether I'm now selling time-share condos in Florida. And they might just be right.

So I've got no choice.

I go back to my office, take one more look at it, note that the abstract is due to the Chairman on August 12, and then realize that since it is only April 27, I've got plenty of time to put something together. After all, it's only a *one-page* abstract. I toss the abstract announcement on my desk, where it instantly gets buried. They've given me plenty of time. No need to worry.

Plenty of time.

May.

June.
July.
August.

I wake up one hot summer morning, thinking about the meeting I have that morning, whom I can call to take a look at my broken garbage disposal, and whether that leaky gate valve on my vacuum station was responsible for the \$10,000 in worthless samples I grew yesterday, when a stabbing pain erupts in the back of my head.

For a moment I think perhaps it is a brain tumor, or possibly an artery exploding, and then I realize the awful truth.

I've got an abstract due in *three* days.

Panic.

I skip breakfast. I cancel meetings. I grab lab notebooks, scan technical journals, and try to figure out just what it is that I've been doing that someone else might find interesting — but not too interesting. This is the double-edged sword inherent in any abstract. I'm going to have to get that abstract *cleared* by the people at Hughes. My boss has to look at it. The bean-counters have to look at it. The people in patents have to look at it. The people in the front office have to go over it. And if it looks *too* interesting, *too* relevant, it may be deemed *proprietary* (this is a term that simply means that the company thinks it may be able to make a buck off it). This is the kiss of death. That will mean that I won't be able to report on my work. My colleagues will think I've turned into a technical dud. Word of my technical inadequacies will reach the funding agencies. My money will be yanked. I'll be fired.

There will be nothing left for me except to take that time-sharing condo-salesman job in Florida.

So I pore over my data, looking for that happy medium of something not too good, and yet not too bad. My stomach growls. I sweat a lot. I've got that brain-tumor-like headache again. And the entire day vanishes without a single word being written. But not to worry, because I've got two days left. So next morning I get to work earlier, manage to type out a few lines, and start to feel pretty good, pretty confident. I celebrate by going to a meeting. And when I return to my

desk a strange thing happens. Everything starts working backwards. The abstract has to be at MIT by 5 p.m. on Friday, which means I have to have it to Federal Express by 3 p.m. on Thursday (these things are always sent by Federal Express — it is some great unwritten rule of abstract submission etiquette), which means that since it is now 10:32 on Thursday morning I've got four and a half hours left.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

This procedure is always last-minute. *Always*. This is a fundamental rule. If it's due on Thursday at 3 p.m., I'll be working on it until 2:55 p.m., and then find myself making a run through the building to toss it to the Federal Express person as he's leaving the parking lot.

It's a fact.

Death by heart attack while chasing the Federal Express person with abstract in hand is the fourth leading cause of death of research engineers. Look it up, if you don't believe me.

Now I begin to pound the keyboard (none of it is usable — I'm simply pounding), I swear at my floppies, refuse to answer my phone, and growl more loudly than normal at anyone who even gets near my office. And then word gets around —

quickly. *He's working on an abstract.* They stay away. No one wants to witness the panic, smell the fear. They don't want to be reminded of the fact they've got abstracts due in a week or a month.

The clock ticks.

Lunch has come and gone without me. My stomach growls. I growl back. It's 1:46. And then something flashes in my head.

No.

It's not that rupturing artery.

But, at this point, I'd almost welcome it.

It's an idea. I rifle through the data, look at transistor characteristics, at doping profiles, at growth rates and diffusion characteristics. And suddenly I see it. I know what I can tell them.

My fingers are a blur.

My computer bleeps continuously and my mouse smokes.

And suddenly, before I even realize it, I've got an abstract. And only now do I title it. This is important — critically important. It's got to have the correct *buzz words* in it or else no one will take it seriously. So I throw in a *High Speed*, an *Abrupt Junction*, an *AllInAs* and *GainAs*, and for good measure an *Elimination* or possibly even a *Solution* if I'm feeling really bold, and then I've got it done.

Almost.

Now it's time to list the authors.

"What's this?" you might be ask-

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ing. Are you thinking that since I wrote the abstract that means I am the author?

No.

No. No.

I just grew the thin films that were used to construct the transistors that were components of the circuits that were then tested by the designers. I list the names of the designers, the processors, the etchers, the lithographers, the circuit testers, and all the technicians who ever saw my thin films. And then I list the names of those that I might have *talked* to about the work. And if I'm lucky I'll find that my boss's name is one among that list. If not, I'd better figure out some way to add him. I don't believe I have to explain this to you. We all have bosses, and they're all pretty much the same.

When all this is done, I've got ten people listed as authors. Half of them don't even know of the existence of the conference that I'm submitting this abstract to, while at times it seems as if the other half barely even knows of *my* existence. But that's okay. The abstract is now *politically* correct.

I've got the abstract done.

Not quite.

I have to make copies, anywhere from fifteen to thirty. When the abstract arrives at the Chairman's office, he does not look at it, judge it on the spot, and then drop me a line, telling me that I can present this little technical gem at the conference.

No.

He has to send copies to his committee, an elite group of experts that will pass judgment on my work, a hand-picked panel of experts, who, I pray, are holding no grudges against me. So I run to the copy machine. The Federal Express truck leaves in ten minutes. I slap the abstract down, punch the machine for 30 copies, and then stand back.

There are several things that can happen at this point.

The machine jams.

The toner dematerializes.

Some sensor at location 12B decides that it hates me.

The paper tray feels that life is no longer worth living and ejects itself from the copier.

All of these things happen.

It should be noted for completeness that copying of abstracts is the third leading cause of death among research engineers. But I persevere. I've been here before. I rip open the machine's front panel, pull out that crumpled piece of paper, pour in some toner, glare at the sensor at 12B, jam the paper tray back in, and then stab the start button.

It copies.

I pull out those thirty sheets, still toasty warm, and start running. I jam them into the addressed envelope (I addressed this yesterday, knowing exactly where I'd be at this time), and hit the loading dock with at least fifteen seconds to spare, tossing it to the Federal Express person.

I made it look easy.

But that's because I'm a pro.

The Federal Express person takes it, and it's on its way. I've got nothing to worry about now. Well, not quite. Remember that little thing about getting *clearance*. Clearance takes at least two weeks. I was supposed to get it before the abstract left the building. I chuckle to myself as I walk back to my office.

No way.

When I get back to my desk I fill out the clearance paperwork. I always do this last. *Always*. Because at this point it doesn't make any difference. If I'd actually done what I was supposed to do, and waited for clearance before sending the abstract, I would have missed the abstract deadline, and my paper wouldn't have been accepted (and for those of you who suggest that the abstract should have been written two weeks early, I suggest you stop reading this right now and start working on your 1993 income tax return). I would have been labeled a technical dud and been on my way to Florida. It's as simple as that. So I've got nothing to lose. If two weeks from now I find out they've decided to label the abstract *proprietary*, I can always call up the Chairman and have it yanked. Of course that means that he'll never accept anything from me again. But I don't care. It won't make any difference. Because if I don't present at this conference there won't be a next time. *Remember*.

So there's nothing to worry about.

It's now in the hands of the gods.

I fill out the abstract clearance forms, hand them in, and then go to a meeting. It's nice to get back into the swing of things. In a few weeks I'll get the clearance back, signed by a half-dozen people whom I've never heard of, and who I know have absolutely no idea what the abstract is technically about, and I'll file it away.

Now the really tough part comes.

I'm waiting to hear from the Chairman. I'm trying to figure out what those committee members think about the abstract, think about me, and about Hughes Research Labs. I pray that before they've read it they're well-rested, and that *their* bosses haven't just chewed them out, and that there were no recent marital disputes.

Several months later, after yet one more uneventful trip to the restroom, I go to my mail slot. And there it is, a letter from the program Chairman.

I don't open it there.

No.

I hurry back to the privacy of my own office.

I stand there, with the door closed, my hands slightly shaking, and I slowly open it. I am fully aware of the statistics. The second leading cause of death of research engineers is rejection of abstracts.

I pull the letter out.

It's been *accepted*.

In three months I must fly to Boston, present a fifteen-minute talk to a thousand or so people, and have with me a ten-page paper to expand on my abstract, which will then be printed in a journal.

I panic.

My head pounds.

My heart beats chaotically.

And I remember that the number one leading cause of death among research engineers is having an abstract *accepted*. But the moment passes, I have not dropped dead, and I quickly calm down, realizing that the conference is months away.

I've got plenty of time to prepare.

Plenty.

I swear I won't wait until the last minute this time.

No way.

I toss the acceptance letter on my desk and head off to a meeting. (Next issue I'll take you to the conference — stay tuned.) □

The Return of the Really Ugly Zombie Avocados From the Planet Mars



I can't believe that an entire year has passed since the last time it happened. But now the sickness is upon me again, and it's time to end my suffering with the second annual Dementos report on upcoming B-features.

Already on the video shelves is the tongue-in-cheek *Bloodsucking Pharaohs in Pittsburgh*. The title of the film pretty much gives away the plot, but for the horror aficionado, the special make-up effects are by horror veteran Tom Savini. (One interesting point to note: the film is directed by Alan Smithy. Alan Smithy is the catch-all name used by the Directors Guild when the real director doesn't want his or her name attached to the film, whatever the reason.)

Last year's Cannes Festival unveiling of the horror and science fiction B's ranges from "you've got to be kidding" to "these people should be committed." Full Moon Entertainment has taken over from Troma Inc. with the most bizarre in the pipeline, but Troma gets the year's best-title award with *Chopper Chicks in Zombie-town*. It's the poignant tale of a gang of macho misfit motorcycle mamas who roll into a quiet desert town looking for men but are welcomed by the undead. *Chopper Chicks* opened late last year in selected theaters. And they say romance is dead. Actually, come to think of it, in this film it is.

Other tasty morsels to view behind padlocked doors include *Tyranno-Spacesaurus!*, in which an intelligent tyrannosaurus from outer space comes to Earth but can only communicate telepathically through a young boy; *Flesh Gordon Meets the Cosmic Cheerleaders* (I think it's self-explanatory); *Terror of Manhattan*, starring Robert "Freddy" Englund, in which young

dancers at a Leningrad ballet school run by a grotesque choreographer are being murdered one by one; *Mr. Sandman*, in which military sleep-deprivation experiments go awry and unleash a monster inside a missile complex, directed by John Dykstra; and *Book of the Child*, in which a young couple faces terrifying consequences when they use a satanic fertility rite to conceive a child.

Full Moon Entertainment has revised production on its slate of upcoming genre films. Previously announced *Trancers II*, *Arcade*, and *Dollman* have now completed filming. *Netherworld*, written by Billy Chicago and directed by David Schmoeller, commenced shooting last June. The story concerns an inherited plantation that is the gateway to the underworld. The rest of the lineup includes *Dangerous Toys*, in which a group of people are trapped in a warehouse with toys that come to life; *Seed People*, who are the result when plants take control of people's minds; *Puppet Master III*, written by Courtney Joyner; and *Dr. Mordrid*, co-written by Joyner and Full Moon Chairman Charles Band, who will also direct the film, which stars Jeffrey (Re-Animator) Combs retreading familiar territory as an eccentric doctor who conducts experiments in other dimensions. The Full Moon films will be released straight to video and cable markets.

OK, I think the fever has passed for another year.

Now, on to some legitimate film news.

The German independent company Cinevox Entertainment has a thirty-plus film schedule planned over the next five years. Set for a summer 1992 start date is *The Neverending Story III*, to be written

by Karin Howard; she also wrote the screenplay for the second *Neverending Story* feature. Cinevox has two other genre films on its roster: *Special Class*, a \$15-million Italian-German co-production, directed by Mario Orfini, and *Krabat*, based on the fantasy novel *The Magic Mill* by Otfried Preussler. *Krabat* is also planned as a possible miniseries.

With over 200 animators on staff, the Berlin-based company Extrafilm will begin production early this summer on the next of the *Astérix* series. Budgeted at around \$11 million, the screenplay will be based on the *Astérix* album *The Great Crossing* and will be directed by Keith Ingram.

Production is sailing ahead on both of the Christopher Columbus movies due out this year. Ridley Scott's \$40-million *Christopher Columbus* started shooting in September and will star Gérard Depardieu in the title role. The Salkind brothers' \$50-million version had Timothy Dalton (last seen as the nasty Nazi, Neville Sinclair, in *The Rocketeer*) as the eponymous hero in *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery*. Writer John Briley, who won an Academy Award for his screenplay of *Gandhi*, is reworking the original script by Mario Puzo. The race is on for both films to be completed by 12 October 1992 in time for a premiere on Columbus Day.

Dennis Hopper signed on with Electric Pictures to direct and co-star in a psychic thriller called *Spirit Moves* which began shooting last fall. Principal photography has been completed for another Electric Pictures film, *Waxwork II: Lost in Time*, starring Zach (Grellins) Galligan and Canadian model Monika

Schnarre. The plot for this film, written and directed by Anthony Hickox, revolves around a young couple who quantum leap through time, finding themselves caught up in the battle between good and evil. There are cameo appearances by Patrick (*The Avengers*) MacNee and Marina (*Star Trek: TNG*) Sirtis.

Set for release in March 1992 is Stephen King's *The Lawnmower Man*. The cast includes Jeff Fahey and Pierce Brosnan.

There is a tentative release date of early '92 for Stephen King's original script *Sleepwalkers*. King describes the "Sleepwalkers" of the film as real creatures who are based on the legends of vampires and werewolves. In the magazine *Iniquities*, director Mick (*Critters 2*) Garris reports that he sees the film as "Norman Rockwell Goes to Hell."

Halloween was the appropriate start date for the filming of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Cast as the Count is Gary Oldman, with Winona Ryder as Mina, Anthony Hopkins as Van Helsing, Keanu Reeves as Jonathan, and Tom Waits as the troubled Renfield. The Jim Harts screenplay will follow closely the original Stoker novel including using the little known characters of Quincey (Bill Campbell) and Holmwood (Cary Elwes).

More contemporary vampire adaptations will include Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and a sequel to *Lost Boys*, to be directed by Richard Donner.

Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment, along with Universal Pictures, is developing a theatrical feature of the Harvey Comics character *Casper the Friendly Ghost*. Using the techniques of the *Roger Rabbit* film, *Casper* will be a combination of live action and animation. Since Universal bought 20 percent of Harvey Comics Entertainment, the two companies have an inbuilt cast of characters for future features. Currently, Harvey is developing a 6- to 8-minute *Baby Huey* short feature, to be written by Bill Kopp, who worked on the two *Roger Rabbit* shorts, *Tummy Trouble* and *Rollercoaster Rabbit*. *Baby Huey* will be released next year in conjunction with a major Universal film.

Although no start date has been

announced, Paramount is in the final stages of preparation for the commencement of the film version of Leslie Charteris's *The Saint*. No word yet on who has been cast as Simon Templar, but Terry Hayes, who wrote *The Road Warrior* and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, will write the screenplay, and Renny Harlin (*Die Hard 2*) will direct.

New Line Cinema has finalized a deal to buy out Media Home Entertainment's rights to *The Hidden* and *The Nightmare on Elm Street* series of films. We expect the release of the sixth *Nightmare* film, *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, starring Robert Englund and Alice Cooper, with cameos by Johnny Depp and Roseanne Arnold (Barr). Part of the reasoning behind the inclusion of *The Hidden* in the deal is that New Line is hoping to eventually make a sequel.

Although still only a glimmer in George Lucas's eye, it seems that there will be at least one more trilogy of *Star Wars* films. Although nothing has been confirmed, the rumors have always been that the next three films will be a prequel and will follow the adventures of a young Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi against the backdrop of the Clone Wars. According to Lucasfilm spokeswoman Lynne Hale, she expects the films to be completed in the next five to seven years. (1997 marks the 20th anniversary of the release of *Star Wars*.)

The many Lucasfilm subsidiaries have not been idle. Lucasfilm Games will market *The Empire Strikes Back* as a Nintendo game in the winter of 1992. Its previous games were *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*, a story idea that was never made into a film but has been redone as a comic book from Dark Horse comics. Another game, *Defenders of Dynatron City*, is being developed for television as an animated Saturday morning series for early this year.

The LucasArts Entertainment Co. has formed a partnership with Mattel Toys to create a line of non-media toys for its LucasToys company. This deal does not infringe upon the rights of LucasArts to sell its film-related toys to other bidding

companies. Today Marin County, tomorrow the world!

Harrison Ford will portray Wild Bill Hickok in the future Silver Pictures film *The Epic Adventures of Hickok and Cody*. Silver Pictures President Michael Levy sums up the film as "about these Western heroes fighting the political corruption in New York during the 1870s — Boss Tweed, Tammany Hall and all that, a Butch-and-Sundance-type caper."

The much beleaguered film *Princess of Mars*, to be directed by John McTiernan, seems to have slipped out of studio limbo and is again in production. Although no principals have been cast, the names of Julia Roberts and Tom Cruise have been bandied around regarding this film, but since the names of Roberts and Cruise have a high commercial value, this is probably a Pavlovian response from the people involved. Take it with a pinch of salt. If *Princess* is shunted into studio neverland, then one possible candidate for McTiernan is the coming-of-age murder mystery *Boy's Life*, based on Robert McCammon's novel of the same name.

Philip K. Dick continues to be a source of inspiration for studios. Fries Entertainment has bought the rights to Dick's short story "Screamers." The \$10-million feature of the same name will be written by Dan O'Bannon who, with co-writers Ron Shusett and Gary Goldman, turned the Dick story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" into the 35mm bloodbath *Total Recall*.

Ron Shusett co-wrote and co-produced *Freejack*. Based on the Robert Sheckley novel *Immortality Inc.*, the film stars Emilio Estevez, Anthony Hopkins, and Mick Jagger. Eighteen years in the future, Earth is a world where the lives of the rich and powerful can be extended by transplanting their minds and souls into bodies that have been transported from the past to the future just before death. Emilio Estevez plays the "freejack" Alex, who is transported to the year 2009 just before his "death," but who wakes up and escapes before the mind transfer can take place. Mick Jagger plays the bounty hunter Vacendak who is hired to hunt him down in this science fiction thriller.

The previously mentioned fantasy *Radio Flyer* was released in February. Originally scheduled for a summer, then fall '91, opening, time delays were needed either, depending on the source, to come up with a stronger promotional campaign, or to allow replacement director Richard Donner, who took over from writer David Mickey Evans, breathing space to finish the film. Either way, the delay has taken *Radio Flyer* out of competition with Spielberg's *Hook* and Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast*, both of which took a huge chunk of box-office receipts.

Bruce Willis is no longer attached to the upcoming defuse-the-robot-bomb-thriller *The Ticking Man* (previously reported in the Nov.-Dec. 1990 issue of *Aboriginal*). Mr. Willis has stated that he no longer feels that he is right for the part.

Odds and Ends:

James Coburn is interested in

developing Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* for a theatrical release because he wants to play the part of Merlin. CineTel films has wrapped production on an SFX thriller, *The Astral Factor*, due to be released on video. The cast includes Brigitte Nielsen, Pat O'Bryan, and Debbie James. Ms. Nielsen will also play the Marvel comic character *She-Hulk*. Adding to the list of growing comic book translations are an animated *Elfquest: The Movie* and a screen version of the successful DC comic *Sandman*, written by Neil Gaiman (Gaiman and artist Charles Vess recently won a World Fantasy Award for a *Sandman* story titled "A Midsummer Night's Dream").

British writer Simon Moore has written a four-hour adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels* for U.S. television and a feature called *The Tenth Kingdom* for U.S.-based Propaganda Films, about fairies invading New York. Although still in the early stages of production, it may be third-time lucky for Christopher

Lambert when he reprises his role in *Highlander III: The Magician*. In active development is the sweetly titled *The Man with the Screaming Brain* (Fangoria Films). It's a Bruce Campbell one-man show, with him acting, directing, and writing the film.

The Sci-Fi Channel bought four British series: *The Prisoner*, *Space: 1999*, and two of Gerry Anderson's "supermarionation" shows, *Captain Scarlet* and *the Mysterons* and *Strigay*.

The *Los Angeles Times* recently reported that the California State Court of Appeals upheld a 1989 verdict reached by a Los Angeles Superior Court jury against Warner Bros. The Court decided that Warner Bros. should pay television producer John Mantley \$1.46 million plus interest for fraudulently squeezing him out of the movie project *I, Robot*, thereby causing a breach of contract. The *I, Robot* screenplay was written by Harlan Ellison and based on the robot stories of Isaac Asimov. □

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Double the Variety

Doubling the content of *Aboriginal SF* makes its eclectic nature more apparent. That goes for stories and contributors. Three of this issue's contributors are making their professional debut in our pages.

Nebula and John W. Campbell Award winner **Gregory Benford** brings us "Rumbling Earth," a story of ancient behemoths resurrected from extinction.

Benford is a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine and



Gregory Benford

an advisor to the Department of Energy, NASA, and the White House. In 1989 he was host and writer for the international television series "A Galactic Odyssey." His articles on science have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *Natural History*, *New Scientist*, and *Omni*.

Among his more than a dozen novels



Joseph Kosiewska

are *Timescape* and his most recent, *Beyond the Fall of Night*, written with Arthur C. Clarke.

"Rumbling Earth" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**, who says "dinosaurs are one of my things." Skinner, who takes his research seriously, tracked down the man who discovered the seismosaurus in 1979. His name is David Gillette (in the story the character is named Dwight Raser), and he is the state paleontologist for Utah. Skinner says he was a great help providing details of what the beast might have



D. Lopes Heald

looked like.

In "The Secret Nature of Space and Time," by **Joseph Kosiewska**, Albert Einstein is having a very bad day.

Kosiewska began his writing career at age seven with a 70-page novella called "Mr. Amazement and his Spaceplane." More recently he has sold a short story entitled "Late Night" to *Buffalo* magazine, and he's completed a suspense novel about a computer pirate.

Kosiewska has a master's degree in English Literature and is married to Jeanine Lefebvre, a beauty consultant. His pet loves include large, smelly cigars.

"The Secret Nature of Space and Time" is illustrated by **Charles Lang**. When I spoke to him, Lang had just finished his seventh full-color cover in a row for the magazine *Cemetery Dance*.

Three of the issues he has done covers for have sold out, and in October *Cemetery Dance* won the World Fantasy award for best magazine.

Humans are the oppressors on the occupied planet of an alien race in "Rif-

fles" by **D. Lopes Heald**.

"Riffles" is Heald's first short story sale. The Nevada author has also completed two novels and is working on an SF private detective adventure series.

She is married to **Blaine Heald**, a federal law-enforcement ranger, and she says her five-year-old daughter Amy provides the names for many of her characters. "Since she can't read, I know they are originals," says Heald.

"Riffles" is illustrated by **Peter Peebles**, who also makes his first ap-



Charles Lang's head

pearance in *Aboriginal SF*.

Peebles received his training at the Kansas City Art Institute. After leaving the art world for a time, he started painting seriously and attending conventions three years ago.

Peebles sold the original art for this



Anthony P. Russo



John Moore

story at a convention and was surprised at the interest the painting generated. "It had more impact than I thought it would," he says. Now he is working on a deal with a major publisher who likes his vampire illustrations.

"Sid Dex: Once a Classic, Always a Classic" is a not-too-serious detective story set in an alternate universe. "Sid Dex" is the first short story sale for author Anthony P. Russo, and he says "getting published for the first time made my year."

Russo, a technical writer who lives in Virginia, has produced several other stories, a screenplay, and illustrations and is working on "Sid Dex: The Collected Case Files," a 1930s serial-style role game.

He is married to Jo Ann Elizabeth, an up-and-coming radio personality.

"Sid Dex" is illustrated by Charles Lang.

Corporate espionage claims a new kind of victim in "Sacrificial Lamb" by John Moore.

Moore is an *Aboriginal* veteran. His last story for us was "Hell on Earth" (Jan.-Feb., 1991). When I spoke to him, Moore was still riding high from selling his first novel, a fantasy called *Slay and Rescue*. Editor Toni Weisskopf of Baen

books, the first person he sent it to, promptly bought it.

The rest of the story sounds like something out of a glitzy novel. Moore's contract arrives the day he catches a plane to attend ChiCon, the 1991 World Science Fiction Convention. Not long after that he is in a tuxedo, sipping champagne in a crowded hotel suite where Baen Books is throwing a lavish party to fete Hugo winner Lois McMaster Bujold. Moore and Jim Baen sign his new contract right there on a coffee table.

Chemical engineer Moore is now working on his second novel, a hard SF technothriller about oil drilling below the polar ice cap.

"Sacrificial Lamb" is illustrated by Larry Blamire. Blamire says a psychological-thriller screenplay he has written is being shopped around Hollywood by an enthusiastic producer. He has also been writing some plays on commission.

A dinner-theater murder mystery



Jerry Fuchs

with an SF theme titled "The Asteroid Murders," which he wrote under a pen name, was performed in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts in late February. And Blamire's critically acclaimed play "Jump Camp" underwent some rewriting and was read at the Charles Playhouse in Boston recently.

The leading edge of computer technology reveals its funny side in Dean Whitlock's "Sliding the Edge."

Whitlock has been publishing short stories since 1987. His story "Containment" appeared in our third issue (Feb.-March 1987). Two of his recent stories, "On the Death of Daniel" and "The Woman, the Pilot, the Raven," appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Whitlock also writes video scripts, murder-mystery weekends, and plays. His one-act play "Red Hots" won a 1986 playwriting contest sponsored by the Parish Players of Thetford, Vermont.

"Sliding the Edge" is illustrated by Larry Blamire.



Carol Heyer

In "The Shoot" by Patricia Anthony, a murderer is forced to relive his crime in front of an audience.

Anthony has been selling her sad, sometimes wrenching tales to *Aboriginal* for several years now — "Good Neighbor" (Sept.-Oct. 1988), "Eating Memories" (May-June 1989), and "Belief Systems" (Sept.-Oct. 1989) to name a few.

Now she has sold two novels to Harcourt-Brace Jovanovich, which is starting a new line called Quality SF.

The first one out is called *Cold Allies*. To research it she immersed herself in weapons and tactics information, even flying a fighter simulator and riding in an M1A1 tank.

When I spoke to Anthony she was recuperating from gall-bladder surgery and getting used to a changed diet and slimmer figure.

"The Shoot" is illustrated by Carol Heyer.

Publisher's Weekly recently ran an article on the Easter selling season that features a picture of Heyer's top-selling children's book *The Easter Story*. Heyer has been busy illustrating fantasy collector cards, game covers, and maps for TSR. She's also working on a children's book, *Rapunzel*, and painting some



Geoffrey Landis



Dean Whitlock

religious art for unlimited-edition posters.

The protagonist of "Repair Man" by



Mike Moscoe

Valerie Freireich is a company man, born and bred.

Freireich was once a company attorney, but now she has her own practice, which leaves her time to write, although not enough. When I spoke to her she had finished her second novel, titled *Becoming Human*, but hadn't sent it out to publishers yet. Freireich is the author of "Measure for Measure" in our last issue.

"Repair Man" is illustrated by David Deitrick, who is finishing up classes at the University of Tennessee this spring. After that he has to put on a show and he'll have his Master's thesis in art completed.

Recently he and wife Lori Deitrick took part in a local show of East Tennessee SF artists for the second year in a row.

The voyeurism of the nightly news and the luridness of violent crime feed off each other in the disturbing "V is for Culture" by Ann K. Schwader.

Schwader has written both poetry and fiction for *Aboriginal*, much of it with a crime theme ("Neighborhood Watch" (Sept.-Oct. 1991), "Nectar" (March-April 1991)).

Some poetry by Schwader is appearing in the spring issue of *Weird Tales*, and she recently sold a story to *After Hours*.

She says a local specialty store in Denver called Little Bookshop of Horrors had her and Lucy Taylor do a reading together this past fall. She says their styles are quite different, but it went very well.

"V is for Culture" is illustrated by Carol Heyer.

"Friday Night is Date Night" is a charming tale of adolescent romance by Mike Moscoe.

And I guess it's pretty tame coming from a guy who was recently on an SF con panel titled "The Evolution of Eroticism."

Moscoe's first published short story

was "Summer Hopes — Winter Dreams" in *Analog* last year. The Washington state resident is a government bureaucrat by day and finds himself part of a national drama: the furor over spotted owls and old-growth forests. "I'm with the folks in the middle getting rocks and lawsuits thrown at us by both sides," he says.

"Friday Night is Date Night" is illustrated by Lori Deitrick.

Deitrick made me feel good when I spoke to her. It was late February and she was still sending off Christmas gifts.

She says this year has been a busy one for her. She is doing freelance textile design work for a carpet company and commissioned portraits, including one of a German shepherd. She and husband David did find time to drive up to Springfield, Mass., for Boskone.

In "A Sense of Sharing" by Leonard Rysdyk, organ donation has taken on a new dimension of political correctness.

This is Rysdyk's first short story sale. The New York City resident has a



Doug Franklin

Master's degree in English and teaches college. He lists his peeves as communism and cyberpunk.

"A Sense of Sharing" is illustrated by Larry Blamire.

In "Gray Lies" by Doug Franklin, the fate of future worlds rests on the decision of one heartsick captain.

Franklin, who also wrote "The Transformative Ethic" (Jan.-Feb. 1991), is an MIT graduate. He is no longer working for a mining company in Alaska. Instead he's doing R and D at a university center for information technology.

Franklin has written a novel as well as several short stories. He says his writing tends to deal with technological topics, which are "second nature" to him.

"Gray Lies" is illustrated by Charles Lang.

"The Amnesia Addict" marks the fourth appearance by poet Bruce Boston in *Aboriginal*. His novel *Stained Glass Rain* is forthcoming from Ocean View Books, and *Sensuous Debris*, a collection of Boston's poems from 1972

through 1992, is due soon from Ashland Enterprises.

Geoffrey A. Landis pumps out oc-



Leonard Rysdyk

casional poems and stories when he is not working at the NASA Lewis Research Center. He won a Nebula Award in 1990 for the short story "Ripples in a Dirac Sea." This is his second appearance in *Aboriginal*.

Holly Lisle's poem "Pensive Ruminations on Impermanence in a Technophilic World," marks her second appearance in *Aboriginal*. "To An Android Love," was her first professional publication, and she now has a novel, *Fire in the Mist*, has been accepted for publication by Baen Books.

Jerry Fuchs's new twist for *Aboriginal* is "Rat Race," a post-apocalypse cartoon strip. He has a black-belt in I-shin-Ryu and loves coffee, and stories by Harlan Ellison.

Jerry will be waiting anxiously to see if you'd like to see more of "Rat Race." □

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Riffles

By D. Lopes Heald
Art by Peter Peebles

The human arrived near dusk, limping down the dirt road in front of grandmother's lonely, patchwork farm. His dark skin was leaking — the way they do — and dust had collected on him in muddy streaks. In sunset's orange light, his pack created a deformed silhouette, even for a human. And his shirt hung in tatters, flapping loose about his hips.

Our morfas scented him and went wild. I grabbed for Yarker's flying mane, but he was too fast. His mate launched past me, backing the attack. By the time I reached the road, the human was down.

Twisted on his side, he was wedged against his pack, with Yarker's front feet on one shoulder. The morfa's fanged jaws were arched around the alien's throat, threatening, but not yet ready to kill.

I didn't dare call for help. Anything might set off the morfa or provoke the bitch to join in. For the moment she crouched near the hedge, watching — the tip of her tail flicking with anticipation.

I backed a step. I couldn't see any blood, but the human lay limp. Either he was smart or dead. If the latter, why was Yarker still threatening?

Pray he's alive.

My gills riffled and fanned. My vision brightened painfully. I knew with visceral certainty that this would be the worst day in our family's history. Poor as we were, we couldn't afford it.

How could we explain a human slaughter to the human Committee which had managed L'fal since the Xzoi departed? And the last thing I wanted was for my family to have to deal with a bloody alien body. Humans were diseased creatures, foul, leaking body fluids in at least ten different ways that I knew of, and I knew very little about them.

Yarker rumbled. I backed another step.

"Off, boy." I kept the command low, my voice even.

The big red morfa whimpered. He wanted to kill. Close association with me, his master, had taught him that humans meant danger. Kill, his body radiated.

"Here, slooey."

I coaxed him with a careful curve of my four inner fingers, keeping the outer pair and my thumb stationary. Yarker would go without food for a good scratching.

I sensed someone at my back, but refused to take my eyes off the morfa. Another gram of pressure from its fangs, and the human was dead.

"Binky."

The high, little voice startled me, sent my hearts fluttering.

My youngest's wrinkled head bobbed against my knees. To her the morfas were as anthems as she, gentle pets. Yet I'd heard of beasts killing their own cubs in attack rage. My muscles spasmed, and my ears began to glow with fear, but the big bitch stretched her lips lazily and trotted past me to Zephyr.

"Come on, Binky. Ride."

While I stood trembling, I heard the bitch drop in the

dust. My daughter mounted, and the two trotted away.

"It's all right," my brother Tem said at my back.

I hadn't heard him arrive. Thank the Wind someone was here.

I was so tense, I was light-blind and blinked twice before I could focus on Yarker again. The stud looked uncertain. I breathed deep, neck gills fanning, and tried to relax.

"Yarker. Come. Scratch."

I curled my fingers again, beckoning. Without the bitch as audience, it was enough. My beast spun off the human's chest and abandoned his game as if the alien were a play whisk.

Paws puffing dust, he hit me stomach high. I staggered sideways, caught his collar, and started scratching beneath it. Tem and my cousin Aires eased around us, walking hesitantly toward the alien. The man hadn't moved.

Tem stopped three full strides from the human.

"What do we do?" His voice quavered with righteous fear.

"Is it breathing?"

Aires looked at me as if my brain was blistered.

"How do we tell that?"

"Their chests move. I saw it on viewer. The air goes in and out of the bulb holes on their face."

Aires and Tem looked at each other. Aires moved a stride nearer my brother. Together they arched their necks, trying to observe what I was describing without getting within the alien's reach.

There was movement behind me again.

"Riffle?"

Oh, no. "Yes, Manna."

"What has happened, my son?"

"Yarker took exception to our visitor."

"Yarker is trained to stay in the yard. This one trespassed."

I didn't argue. Grandmother confused my morfa with the exceptional beast Grandfather kept until his death. That Yarker was gone back to the wild, but Manna couldn't remember. These days she even talked to grandfather. I'd titled my stud Hastwind, but gave up on the name when she scolded me for confusing the beast.

A name either way didn't make my Yarker any smarter. He'd claimed as his territory every fence post in sight and the hedge from the top of the hill to the ford below. No amount of training influenced him on the matter. He'd caused trouble before, but this was the worst. I whistled through damp lips and tried to think.

"Riffle?"

Good. It was mother.

Yarker was calm enough now that I chanced turning to look at her. Fleet and Gale, Fair and Guster were behind her. Most of the rest of the family lined the hedge, larger children holding smaller up so they could all see.



"Get the kids back," I said.

"Is it ..."

Before she could finish, the alien snorted. Tem and Aires retreated. Tripping over each other, they fell, scrambled to their feet, and were behind me before the man could raise his head.

Yarderk yowled, lunged, and nearly took my arm off. Luckily Fleet thinks faster than Tem and threw himself on the morfa's haunches. That settled Yarderk. Fleet outweighs half of us together. He shoved stubby fingers through Yarderk's collar and jerked hard.

"I'll lock him up."

I nodded, hearts protesting. Fleet could handle the beast better than I, but his departure left me still facing the human. The alien didn't look threatening, but I sympathized with Aires and Tem's fears. One stray drop of blood and we would all die — horribly.

The man rolled to his side and pushed up on one arm. I shuddered. Blood seeped from ragged claw marks across his chest and down one cheek. I couldn't judge if his injuries were serious or not, but we didn't dare touch him. Had Yarderk already spread the humans' plague to us? I prayed not, telling myself that the sand had cleaned the beast's paws before he reached me. I hadn't touched those paws anyway, and the human government assured us the disease could only be spread by direct absorption of fresh human blood. Rationally I knew I had not been exposed. Still, with Yarderk now restrained, we anthen were the ones at risk here, not the human.

Regardless, he wouldn't be happy about his treatment. However much humans fought, even murdered each other, if an anthen accidentally stood in their way, they reacted as if it were the moral crime of the last several centuries.

My gills were riffling again. I tried to calm my breathing. Fear would only make the human more aggressive.

"Sri-manim." I called a respectful greeting.

The alien straightened slightly, head wobbling. He blinked at me, seemed to focus, then blinked past me, seeing my brothers, cousins, and mothers.

"Anthen," he said.

His voice was deep, but breathy. I knew he was not well. How could anything so dirty be well?

"A beast attacked me," he said.

"Yes."

For the first time I realized there might be a simple way out of this disgrace. But my toes tingled, and I knew I couldn't bear the shame of lying, no matter the risk.

"My beast," I admitted.

He blinked. "I thought they were all wild."

"Some few come to live with us. We try to civilize them."

I shrugged. Beyond that I did not know how to explain to a human. For human-anthen discourse, this conversation was already long.

"Where is it?"

"We've caged it."

"I'm sorry to cause trouble."

I blinked this time. I searched my memory, wondering if *sorry* could mean something different in his dialect from mine. But we were both speaking official B'dright.

"We, Sri-manim," I said, choosing each word carefully, "are pained to have witnessed your pain."

I couldn't tell if he heard. He didn't say anything, just scratched around in the dust, straightening his pack.

When he tried to stand, he didn't make it — fell on his knees instead.

My mother caught my arm and tugged me back a step.

"Sri-anthen," the man said from the ground, "could I borrow a stick for a staff? My legs are weak."

I stared at him, startled by his inhuman behavior. Then I remembered myself, looked back to my family, and gestured for help. Guster took off at a run.

We stood in the dusk and the dirt and waited, and before I could think of anything to do, Guster was back with a freshly chopped sapling. He looked at me, sucked his lips into an O, then walked past as brave as life and laid the green staff within the alien's reach.

I don't know that I could have done it. Guster always was the boldest of us.

The alien sat still, waiting until Guster was at my side again before he reached for the stick. Whether that was weakness or courtesy, I couldn't guess.

When he stood finally, it was obvious he couldn't walk far this evening. I'd have to keep Yarderk caged until I was certain the alien was clear of the beast's territory. But what if the man died along the road? He'd still lay curse to our house.

"Mother," I said in Windle dialect, "I think we ought to give it a spot to rest, keep it in sight until it is stronger."

Her face looked horrified, but she swallowed the first thing she meant to say, mouth O-ing, gills riffling.

Manna spoke first. "It's human. Dig it a grave and shove it in with sticks."

Everyone froze. Everyone stared at Manna. Then everyone turned to stare at the human. But he hadn't heard, was still struggling to get his legs straight.

"Now, Manna," my mother said. "Times have changed ..."

"Paff! The only good human is a ..."

Guster wrapped a huge paw over Manna's mouth and an arm about her waist. His bravery knew no bounds this evening, even when Manna dug in with her fangs.

Eyes slitted, he levered the old woman over one hip and started for the house. I knew we were all going to live through hell for his temerity. That would still be better than not living. And if Manna were allowed to keep talking, she'd break twenty-eight human regulations at least. No one could convince her that the *honorable* Zxoi had abandoned us rather than fight a war over control of L'lal fields.

What use the humans had for our planet they didn't say. But they had put a receiver in the village store, and I'd seen imagings of the Committee's president. He looked a cleaner, more intelligent creature than what we saw in the countryside. I'm only an ignorant peasant, but I thought L'lal a likely dumping ground for their insane. The Zxoi had used North Continent for such a purpose for years.

The man wobbled suddenly towards us. We all gave back, keeping a precise distance from him. My cheeks ached, and I tried to relax my circled lips.

"Mother? We have to do something."

"They say you can't contract anything from them except by getting their blood on you."

She looked at me hopefully, wanting confirmation.

"Yes, Mother. Body fluids transmit their diseases, but none of their germs can live outside a body for more than seconds."

I believed it. At least I tried to believe it. I had to believe it.

"Sri-manim," I addressed him, "You do not seem well. Perhaps you would wish to spend the night within our corral. You would be safer there. We will lock up the morfas."

Such an arrangement would effectively lock the human in as well, but he would be safe. Certainly none of us would touch him. I only hoped he wasn't insulted by the suggestion.

His head sagged. I thought he might fall. But then he jerked straight again.

"I would be honored, Sri-anthen."

I was startled again by his respectful manner. We tried to keep to ourselves and seldom had dealings with humans, but I had never heard of or witnessed one being polite.

I motioned the rest of the family toward the house. The children hesitated. Mother raised her hand and split her fingers into sets, and they went. While Manna would rag you to insanity when upset, Mother made herself understood immediately.

The family faded. I followed them, walking backwards, keeping my eyes on the stranger. He steadied as he progressed through the hedge gate, but a breath would still topple him. It was unnerving to see a human so vulnerable.

He kept his eyes on mine, as if leaning on my strength. I realized, as we crossed the outer yard, that his long strides were gaining ground on me. We were so close that I could see body fluids dribbling from him, clear liquid and red mixing with the dust, caking as it dried.

My digestive tract coiled and constricted. How did they tolerate themselves?

I back-stepped past the well.

"Rifle ..."

My mother's voice was urgent. I glanced around, thinking there was something I might stumble over. It wasn't that at all. She waved, short and quick, hand held low and inconspicuous. She was worried about our water. My gills flared. I hadn't given it a thought.

I tried to angle sideways and maneuver the alien away from the well. He stopped — not an arm's length from it. The quills on my head stood on end.

Not the water!

"Please," he said, with a quaver in his voice. "Just a sip."

My mouth collapsed into a straight line. Until that moment, I hadn't given a thought to the reality of his pain, only the implications of it for us.

I glanced around, but Guster was still inside connected to Manna. No one else was going to do this. So I took a quick breath and walked to the well. The human leaned on his staff, waiting, so still and dusty gray that he nearly disappeared in the dusk.

I cranked a bucket of water to the well's stone lip, found an old tin that we wouldn't miss, and filled it. Walking to within a stride of the man, I set it in the dirt. That was cruel, as it turned out. He limped to it, stared down while he took a long breath, then crumpled, too weak, tired, and battered to retrieve the cup any other way.

Though he didn't ask, I filled it for him again, using the ladle so that I touched nothing he had touched. When I filled it a third time, he dumped the water on his face. He

looked so pitiful by then that Mother signed to Moria, and my sister fetched a dented pan from the kitchen. I filled that and pushed it within his reach.

He washed more properly then and seemed comforted by the process.

"More?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Too tired. Thank you."

His politeness was painful. I felt white with embarrassment.

"Come. We'll get you safe within the corral gate. There's a bit of grass there, and the hedge will shelter you."

It cost him to get up again. I felt stupid watching the slow agony of his struggle, but there was no touching him.

When I started backing, he followed the same as before. I could hear the family departing behind me, realizing they didn't want to be trapped at the corral gate with the human.

Breezy, my wife, and Whisper, my sister-in-law, fled for the barn. There were still chores to be done. I'd left the sneaners only half slopped. I could hear the animals grunting and fighting over what little dinner they'd gotten. The creatures' contention seemed an early warning of human contagion.

I backed through the corral's gate and into the inner yard. He followed, surprising me with the care he took not to touch the gate in passing. Then he turned to his left and settled next to the hedge.

He was done. I walked nearer, squatted and watched him. His eyes were already closed, head cradled against his pack. There were bugs in his wounds, and he could not be comfortable.

It occurred to me that getting him into the corral was perhaps a worse mistake than leaving him to his own devices. If he died here, there would be certain disaster. So I must make sure that he lived.

Mother had already realized that. As I turned to rise, she came out of the house, arms loaded with blankets, bandages, and an old pan full of steaming water. I helped her settle everything on the ground within the man's reach. She even sacrificed an old water skin so he could have drink at hand.

"Mother?" I asked, seeing it.

She only shrugged, and I saw in her eyes that his politeness had touched her, too.

"I'll bring a lantern," she said and turned back to the house.

"Sri-manim?"

His eyeskins twitched.

"Sri-manim."

They opened.

"Your wounds need tending."

He took a deep, shuddering breath. Clear liquid trickled on his cheek.

"Yes."

He was slow, clumsy, and faint, but he roused and began to bathe his wounds with hot water. The pain appeared to waken him more fully. Mother brought a lantern and set it to one side, encircling us in a small yellow dome of light.

He found the bandages and wrapped his right hand. It looked fevered and had surely been injured before the morfas' attack. Perhaps the scent of the man's blood was what had so incited them. Beyond the hand, I was relieved

to see that his wounds appeared minor, and he spent little time on them. I suspected a night's sleep would see him fit enough.

Finished with his doctoring, he took up a bowl of vensa paste — the only thing humans and anthen could both eat — and dug into it with his bare fingers. I was appalled, until I remembered humans didn't have proboscises tucked into the top of their mouths. Since Mother hadn't sacrificed any of our few utensils, he had to eat with his fingers.

He emptied the bowl, drank from the water skin, then closed his eyes and went limp. The blankets lay unnoticed next to him. He shivered once and whimpered in his sleep. He'd freeze before morning.

So I sucked in my cheeks, puckered my behind, and spread the blankets over him.

The house was restless that night. We adults were all too aware of the danger sleeping in our corral. The children picked up our unease, whimpering for us to bring the morfas inside with them. But I didn't trust the beasts just yet. They were still agitated by the human's presence and the scent of his blood. And both were insulted by having been caged.

So it was a fitful settling to rest. Every time I began to drift, Yarker whuffed or yowled. But finally we all did sleep, excepting Guster, who was standing first watch. Normally we trusted to the morfas' patrol at night, but we didn't mean to take a chance on the human rousing and doing some mischief, intended or otherwise, during the night.

Mist had second watch, and I was just waking for the third when Yarker and the bitch started roaring. My stomach sank. The alien must be stirring. But it was worse than that.

Looking out my second-story window, I saw a knot of dark figures crossing the moonlit outer yard. From the heaviness of their shoulders, the shuffling quality of their gait, I knew they were human.

Were they coming for him? Would his politeness evaporate now, turn vindictive with others to back his position? My pulses misbeat and all ten of my hearts danced erratically. I had dreaded this moment for years — the time when humans would discover our poor ragged farm and destroy the family. There was no defense.

What could we do? Kill them? We wouldn't even if we dared touch their bodies. And dead they would lie rotting, condemning us in heaven's eyes and to hell's human justice.

"Breezy."

"What is it?" Her voice quavered.

"Humans." I felt her fear heat. "Get the children. Rouse the others. We'll run into the fields. They won't follow. Or if they do, we're faster. Go on. Quick."

I eased our window open and slipped one leg through.

"Riffle?"

"I have to free Yarker."

"Yes."

She sounded childlike, but there was an underlying calm in her voice that told me she would see to everything, as she always did, so much stronger than I.

I went out the window and eased along the shadowed face of the house. At the corner, I planned to drop to the yard. I didn't get that far. Glancing down, I saw the aliens already at the corral gate. It was locked, and the hedge

was high. I gave a thought to Mist, but he was nowhere in sight. I hoped he was in the house and made no foolish defense.

Something flared in the dark where the humans were gathered at the gate. Then they slipped into the corral, having burned off our poor lock.

I looked for the dark mound of the injured human, but couldn't tell if I was seeing him or only blankets. Surely he heard them?

I was burning with fear, afraid now to move at all. Yarker was tearing at his cage in a full rage. His roaring made it impossible to think.

Run, I prayed. Run, Breezy. Run, everyone.

Then something moved near the hedge. The trailing human of the invaders' group slumped. The second turned and fell before making a sound. The third received his death blow from the rear and screamed.

The remaining six turned as one and lunged. Their attacker was faster and simply disappeared into the hedge shadows.

With my head pressed tight against the house, I could hear and feel movement inside it. The family was leaving.

Run.

Something flashed in the moonlight. Another human screamed. Weapons boomed. My nerves shocked and overloaded. My cheeks puckered inward, my toes knotted. Yarker went silent.

A flash blazed from the fruit tree near the far corner of the hedge. The invading aliens returned fire. But while their blasts tore the poor tree apart, I saw a tattered figure dash through the moonlight and pull open the morfas' cage.

Yarker was very intelligent in his way. He and the bitch slipped out silent, while our human darted away from them, firing and drawing the other aliens' attention. The humans never saw the animals coming.

The screams that followed still haunt me. When the last one died, I was knotted into a ball, my head between my legs. Then the front door banged.

"Good boy, Yarker. Only good human is an eaten one." Gods.

I was through my bedroom window, down the stairs, and onto the porch before the door could slam again. Guster was in front of me and nailed Manna, dragging her into the house screaming and cursing. I didn't know the old woman knew such words.

Yarker sat on the top step, slumped to one side, mewling pitifully. I didn't dare touch him. There was human blood all over him. He didn't look good.

I went back into the house for my bow. The corral was a blood bath. I couldn't let him drag around spreading more of the disease.

I went back out. But trying to take aim, I was trembling so hard that I stopped, took a long breath, and waited for my eyes to refocus so I'd make a good shot of it.

"Don't."

It was a human voice. I froze, then shifted the aim of my arrow to the shadow beyond Yarker.

"He'll heal. I'll tend him. Your animals can't carry the disease. If they did, you'd all be dead already."

It was our human.

"Did you have to kill them?" My voice warbled, and it shamed me.

"Yes. They came to kill me. They would have killed all

of you just to be sure no one knew."

"We're faster." I must have been in deep shock to argue with a human. "We were already running."

"From these men, you could never run far enough."

I felt like the peasant I am. I felt innocent, horrified, and violated. I didn't want to know about human violence. I didn't want to know about their greed or strange, tempting technology. It all made me feel dirty.

"You've killed us anyway," I said. "Either disease will take us or the Committee Guards."

"No. I'll handle the bodies. You build a pyre. We'll bury the ashes. By morning the yard will be safe for you. I swear. Forgive me. I never meant to stop here."

There was nothing to say. I went in, found my heaviest boots, went out the back of the house and around to the barn. Guster, Gale, Tem, and Fleet came with me.

Together, we drove the nervous milk herd into the barn. Then we made a pyre of straw and firewood in the stock yard and fueled it with dried manure and precious oil. When it was burning well, we stood upwind and watched our alien heave bodies into the flames.

It wasn't easy for him. He was wounded, too. But he only stopped to catch his breath. When he brought the ninth, I thought he would rest, but he went back one more time and carried Yarker's dead bitch to the pile. Dragging one leg, Yarker limped at his heels.

That sight shocked me — the agreeing of two such alien minds. But I realized a morfa's bloody instincts would indeed make it more akin to humans than to anthen. I shuddered.

The alien threw the bitch's body into the flames, and Yarker roared. Tem pressed against my back, smelling of fear. Like me, he was old enough to remember life before humans.

The alien tended his and Yarker's wounds by the light of the death pyre, then settled against the morfa's side. While we started a trench along one side of the stockyard, he slept.

One by one, the adults of our family joined us in digging. I took it upon myself — all of this my doing, my morfa that began the disaster — to add wood and oil to the fire and sometimes stir it. Smoke blurred my vision, and I never looked too closely at what I did.

We finished the trench at dawn. When we stood back, our human rose from Yarker's side and retrieved a manure scoop from the barn wall. Limping, he began to shovel ashes into the trench.

None of us left. Sometimes, he lifted something lumpy, and the women looked away. But we stayed, because his silence seemed to cry out at us, and his shoulders betrayed his pain.

He killed these of his kind to protect us, and we were thereby as guilty as he. He could have run, hidden from them in the dark. He hadn't. When they headed for the house, he attacked. He didn't attack to save his life. The numbers against him were so great, surely he expected to die.

By full daylight, the trench was filled. We leveled it with dirt, scattered the extra about the yard, covered it all over with fresh straw and turned the herd into it. The animals were nervous, but relieved to be out in the open. They went about eating and depositing fresh flops. By midday, no one could tell the yard had ever been cleared.

The alien lay in the shade of the corral hedge while we

accomplished all this. When I came to wash down the inner yard, he roused, took the buckets we brought, and managed to erase the worst of the blood before he fainted.

He stayed another day.

I walked him to the road by dawn's light. There were no bodies, no ashes nor blood this morning.

This dawn there were only late summer flowers unfurling for the day, and skips calling from the fence posts, wings cupped, breasts ruffled.

"Will you be all right?" he asked.

"Yes." His concern still surprised me.

"You've been kinder than you need be."

I didn't know what to say, not having been kind in much of any way by our standards. Perhaps as things passed between humans ... who knew?

Yarker paced at the man's heels, and I understood without asking that the animal would go with him.

"Will you be all right?"

"Yes."

His mouth made a strange sort of curve. I knew it was emotion showing, but I couldn't read it.

One thing I needed to ask still. Last night I had lain awake wondering if the pain I thought I saw in him was real or if killing were nothing to him. He was, after all, very adept at it.

Would he turn and kill me if I asked? Would he take offense and send the authorities after us?

"Why did you come our way?"

It was as close as I dared come with my curiosity.

"Looking. Learning."

He licked his lips, a gesture I found repulsive. He noticed my reaction. I blinked, surprised, realized that he was and had been studying my every breath and move.

"Why?"

My question was so audacious that my ears began to burn.

"So you won't always die of our diseases or have to cower from the kind of humans I killed here."

His face tightened. His eyes scrunched closed. Whatever emotion that expression evidenced, I did not think it a pleasant one. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and mastered himself.

"I was sent to spy on the humans in control here," he said, "and to learn about you. I'm not a good man. Mostly, I'm just a trained killer. But there are humans who believe in the sanctity of all life. If I do my job right, they'll help you. But your world won't be the same."

I didn't understand or altogether believe him. After all, there was *good* in him. I stared at my feet and the grass crushing beneath them.

"I am afraid."

"I know. But your family will survive. Only..." He glanced at me, the expression of his eyes stranger than ever. "When humans come peddling our culture and technology, don't believe or take it all. Keep your own ways — the ones that have served you best."

I felt innocent again. But I wasn't ashamed. I looked at the alien, and though I knew he was young by their terms, he looked worn old.

"Go with peace," I said at the road.

If he were anthen, I would have hugged him. We only bowed slightly to each other and parted. I watched until he and Yarker disappeared under the trees down by the river. □

Sacrificial Lamb

By John Moore

Art by Larry Blamire

The Duke didn't like being seen in the day like that, a steroid-pumped black dude and a skinny white dweeb standing out from the mix of chorros and Asian drug scum, but Garret knew the streets were only slightly less crowded at night and the cops far more watchful. They painted out the BioGen logos and hauled the unmarked crate across the cracked sidewalk and up four flights of broken stairs to where Tabitha was waiting. Her eyes lit up when they opened it, and she clapped her hands and squealed. "Oh, Garret, he's just a little boy."

The clone did indeed have the face of a young boy. Garret had to remind himself that the body was fully grown, and just then the Duke spoke up. "He ages fast." He popped open a can of warm beer, and the foam spilled out over his hands. "We grew the bastard in five weeks. He'll look like he's sixty-three by next Tuesday, the computer models say. That's the age you want, right? Sixty-three?"

"Sixty-three, right," Garret said absently. "We go in Tuesday." He was watching the clone. It lay back in its padded box, loosely robed in a BioGen lab coat, and looked seriously up at him. Its face was pale and smooth, with a trace of peach fuzz on the upper lip. The eyes were clear blue, and they looked at Garret with trusting confidence. They were eyes that had never seen pain, never seen failure, never seen a loved parent turn away and walk out of a short life. It had never, he realized, felt hunger or fear or rejection; it had missed, in fact, that entire range of miserable human experience that Garret remembered as childhood. He was looking on the face of innocence, and it made him feel uneasy. It made him feel dirty.

Tabitha knelt down next to it. "Hi, there." She wagged a finger in front of its face.

"Hi," said the clone. It reached up and clumsily grasped the finger. It smiled at her.

"Oh, he likes me," said Tabitha. "Oh, Garret, isn't he sweet?"

"Yeah."

"How much can he talk?"

"Six hundred words, so far, but most of that is military commands. From the training tapes."

"You can teach him ten new words a day, though," the Duke told her. "And he can drink from a cup, but he can't use a knife and fork. It'll probably be less messy if we feed him. And that's all the information we could get. We just grow 'em. The training procedures are classified."

"That's good enough to start. Tabby, if he's thirsty, give him some milk. I'm gonna walk down with the Duke."

"Okay," said Tabitha. She had taken both of the clone's hands in her own and was swinging them gently back and forth. The clone gurgled happily. Garret jerked his head and the Duke followed him out the door. When they got to the last flight of stairs he said, "Tabby's going with us."

"The hell."

"I mean it."

The Duke slammed his fist against the wall. Flakes of paint and wood shook off the ceiling and settled down around them like dry snow. "Damn it!"

"I mean it. Tell Mako to set it up. Passport, credit cards, tickets."

"God damn it, man, you're pushing it. You are really pushing it."

"I know."

The Duke glared at him for a full minute and then let his breath out. "I'll tell him, damn it. But you better be ready to take no for an answer."

"He'll do it," said Garret. "Relax." He turned and started back up the stairs.

When he was up one flight the Duke said, "Garret."

"Yeah?"

The Duke was still on the first landing. "If that clone don't work, you're dead meat. There ain't nothing I can do for you, you understand?"

"I know. Relax. It'll work." He went back into the apartment. Tabitha had the clone sitting up in its crate. He helped her get it into a chair. Despite its clumsiness, it was well grown, a medium-sized man with a lightly muscled body. Garret went into the kitchenette and opened a shopping bag. It held six large packages of Oreos. He took one out and went back and squatted down beside the clone. "Your name is Maximillion Rand. Can you say 'Maximillion Rand' for me?"

"Maximillion Raaand," said the clone slowly.

"That's a start," said Garret. He gave the clone a cookie and let it munch happily. "Now we're going to play a game."

He didn't know where Tabitha came from, or what had happened to her, and he didn't think she could handle talking about it yet. Three months ago they had found her in the ruins of the tenement. Her pimp had abandoned her after she got pregnant, and God only knew what she had been living on since then. She was squatting on the second floor, rocking slowly back on her heels, cradling the baby in her arms, singing to it in a low soft voice. Blond curls were plastered to her forehead with dirt and sweat and her face and hands were covered with welts. She slept with the child in her arms, but rats had attacked them both anyway. Garret and the Duke had to pry the child away from her, and then they buried it in the alley behind the tenement, after cutting through the concrete with an air hammer. The Duke brought in a couple of Mousers, engineered cats with enhanced predatory skills, and when the rats were cleared away they set up camp on the fourth floor and put Tabitha there. For three days she cried whenever they left her alone, but after that she seemed okay. She never men-



tioned the baby again.

They spent another week measuring and cross checking against an ancient set of building plans, and then finally they ripped out the basement floor and started digging the hole.

They dug seventeen feet, and the telephone conduit was right where it was supposed to be. Garret located the optical fibers and tapped them with indium phosphide splitters. He carefully avoided the data links, which were monitored for signal degradation, and no doubt encrypted. Mako had a satellite feed for those anyway. Instead he went for the video lines, the closed-circuit television signals to their security agency, and he got them all. The lobby, the trading pits, the vault, the stairwells and elevators, the main hallways, and of course the exits and entrances. All of them watched 24 hours a day by video remotes, and all of them also patrolled by live armed guards. By the time the clone was ready he had twenty black-and-white monitors running and four color. Those four had audio, too, but you couldn't hear much. The bank employees probably padded the mikes for privacy.

The night the clone arrived he went up on the roof to smoke a cigarette with the Duke and gaze at the InterNet Bank building, dark and solid against the luminous city sky, only three miles away but economically on another planet. It was on the edge of downtown, fronting a bright island of shopping malls and office parks, backed against a depressing gray stretch of rotting condominiums.

"Okay, we're on line," he told the Duke. "I'm seeing everything their own security sees."

"Good. Seen Rand yet?"

"No. Lots of action in the trading pits, though."

"They never shut down. There's always a stock market open somewhere in the world. Bonds. Options. Futures, currency, metal, commodities, it all passes through their hands." And he pointed at the sleek black tower.

"Full of guards," said Garret. "Have you seen these guys? Korean mercenaries, I can tell. Feral like Wolverines and twice as vicious."

There was a rustle behind him and he turned around. A engineered cat looked at him, eyes flashing yellow, and then disappeared into the shadows. "Christ." He put his back to it and tossed his cigarette off the roof, watching the dim orange glow fall sixty feet to the street. A broken figure detached itself from the gloom, put the butt in its mouth, and stumbled on down the street.

"How's your 'ho?"

"Don't call her that, man. She's got a name. She's doing a damn good job with the clone."

"In the darkness the Duke frowned. "I hate that thing. Makes me sick to look at it. It's like a ghost. A zombie."

Which surprised Garret. The Duke was no stranger to bio-prosthetics. It was his job. Four months ago he had shown Garret the work order for Rand's new liver. "Look what I got. Maximillion Rand. He's a big dog at InterNet Bank. A major asshole."

"Yeah," said Garret without interest.

"Probably redlined half the neighborhoods in this city. Sends any investment capital he gets his hands on overseas. Made a hell of a lot of money for InterNet."

"How do you know so much about this guy?"

"Mako's been trying to crack that bank for years. He'd give his first-born son to have an inside man there."

The Duke was always dropping hints about his Yakuza connections. He'd been selling them proprietary RNA sequences and nano-machinery, whatever he could lift from BioGen, constantly angling to get in on a big score. Garret just couldn't see the big black man fitting in with the quietly menacing Japanese.

"So let's grow him one," he tossed out, looking over the work order.

"What?"

"Here, we got the whole genome map right here. We can take an extra graft from the liver, clone the whole body, sell it to your criminal buddies as an inside man."

He was unprepared for the violence of the Duke's reaction. He took Garret by the shoulders with a iron grip. "Where do we grow it?"

"Hey, take it easy, dude. I was just kidding."

"The hell you were!" The Duke pushed him back against the wall and held him there. "Where do we grow it?"

"Third floor. We're growing a batch of kamikazes for the DOD. Half of 'em are off spec and will have to be culled. By next month there's gonna be a hundred empty tanks up there. No one will notice if we use one."

Before he finished, the Duke dropped his shoulders and stepped away. He said, "I'm going upstairs."

When he came back he was carrying an operating manual from one of the DOD tanks. He didn't do any work that night, just read the manual and talked on the phone. When the shift was over he turned to Garret and said, "Mako wants to see you."

Good afternoon, Mr. Rand."

"Good afternoon," said the clone. He nodded to Garret and walked past.

"No," said Garret. "Not like that. Hold the overcoat draped over your arm, like this. Here. Just like on the TV, okay?"

The clone listened obediently, letting Garret rearrange the coat, turning its head to watch the recordings of Rand getting out of his limo and entering the bank. They'd collected about sixty hours of tape, Rand entering the lobby, Rand at his terminal, Rand going to lunch. The clone was being saturated with Rand. "Try it again."

The clone walked up and down the room, nodding curtly to Garret each time he passed, as he'd been taught. Garret looked it over. His hair was turning gray, but not fast enough. They'd have to dye it. And buff the fingernails too. Rand got manicures.

Tabitha came in, dumped an armful of boxes on the sofa, and kissed Garret on the mouth. "Wait till you see what I got."

"In a minute. Look at this." But the clone stopped walking when it saw Tabitha and came to her for a hug. She kissed it on the nose. "Hi, baby. Did you miss me?"

"He missed you," said Garret. "Show Tabby the walk, Maximillion."

The clone started moving again. Tabitha applauded. "Oh, Garret, he looks just like him."

"Damn straight. He's got the walk down perfect." To the clone he said, "That's good. You're a good boy. Practice for ten more minutes and then we'll have some cookies."

"Cartoon," said the clone.

"Yes," said Tabitha. "We'll all have some cookies, and we'll watch a cartoon, because you've been such a good



boy."

The clone beamed at her with puppyish devotion. Tabitha smiled at it and then led Garret to the couch. "I bought the clothes."

"Two suits, good," said Garret. She had a blue suit and a dark gray pinstripe, conservatively cut. "We'll put him in one to practice in, and then we'll give him a fresh suit for the real thing."

"Maximillion Rand wears John Cumbert suits," said Tabitha. "They're custom-made in London. But look at this. Counterfeit John Cumbert labels. I got them from a shop that sells fake designer clothes."

"Great, baby, that's really great." It was just the sort of detail a sharp-eyed security goon might catch. Garret hugged her. "Did you get the Benrus watch?"

Tabitha shook her head. "Not fashionable enough. They cost a lot, but not enough to fake."

"We'll get Mako to buy us a real one, then. It's a must. People pay too much attention to watches." He went through the rest of the bags. White shirts, silk ties, shoes. Too bad this stuff would only be worn once. Bohème cologne. "What's this? Pajamas?"

"Well, I thought he needed some. He can't keep wearing the Duke's old sweat clothes."

"Winnie the Pooh?"

"Oh, he loves Winnie the Pooh."

Garret looked at her curiously. He said, "We'll start teaching him the voice tonight."

The Duke said, "Mako's people are locked in on the InterNet satellite signal. They're ready to download, they say. All they're waiting on is for you to open a communications channel."

"Good," said Garret. He hated dealing with Mako's people. The smooth-skinned Yakuza, in their shiny smooth silk and acetate suits, made him edgy. They had no emotions, besides a quiet, predatory confidence. At least the Mafia grieved over its dead. Mako probably ate his.

"How long does Mako need to be in?"

"Twelve seconds."

"That's all? What's he taking out?"

"He's not taking nothing out. He's putting in his own worms. Once he's in, he's in to stay. No matter how sophisticated their counter-penetration programs are, they can never be sure they got him out, or that any piece of data hasn't been contaminated."

"Huh," said Garret. "So then InterNet has to make a deal with Mako."

"I guess. But I also guess that maybe InterNet can find a bigger dog to eat Mako. That's why you ain't sticking around."

It took Garret a few seconds to make the mental adjustment. "Me? What about you?"

"I'm thinking, man. If this works I'll be in solid with Mako."

Garret didn't have an answer. After a while he said, "I thought we were a team."

"You don't need me anymore, man. Got to move on. You know how it is."

"Yeah. I know how it is. Where's Tabby's passport?"

The Duke shrugged. "Mako didn't..."

"The hell he didn't. Hand it over, man."

The Duke snarled and passed him another packet.

Garret checked the passport. Tabitha was smiling into the camera, but her eyes were sad and haunted with memory. She looked even younger in the picture than she did in real life.

The Duke said, "If you have to move fast, she's gonna slow you down. Pretty girl like that will attract attention, too."

"That's bullshit, man. Couples don't attract attention. Look around. Couples everywhere. It's lone guys like you and me that make the cops sit up and take notice."

"All whores are crazy, and that one's really unstable. She freaked once, she'll do it again."

"You've been hanging out with the Japanese too much," Garret said. He put the passports away.

No, don't look at me. Look at the screen. This is important. You have to type in all the commands exactly right."

The clone nodded, but his eye-hand coordination had never developed very well, and Garret could sense the frustration building up inside. He hunched patiently over the monitor, tapping the keys with two fingers. "SET LOG OPEN. SET SWITCH S3. RGET S9 80 5." All in all, there were twenty-seven commands, and they had to be in the right order, without a typo. It was tough task for a kid who'd never seen a computer until the day before yesterday.

Yeah, right, thought Garret. A kid. Look at him. There were crow's feet around the clone's eyes, and the skin on his neck was starting to sag. Liver spots had appeared on the backs of his hands. The roots of his hair were now quite gray. Garret thought of the problems of middle-aged men, even healthy ones. The minor backaches, the stiffness after sitting too long, the lengthening of vision. What did he think about this, Garret wondered, the brief peak of youth and the fast, fast slide into old age? Did he have any idea at all what was happening to him? "You missed one. Start again."

The clone looked up. His eyes were brimming with unshed tears. Tabitha came over and rubbed his shoulders. "C'mon, Maxie. You can do it. Just copy the numbers from the card to the screen. Come on. You're doing great." The clone nodded, and his face set in a look of almost comic determination. He started typing again.

Garret took Tabitha aside. "Don't call him Maxie, Tabby. They don't call Rand Maxie. I don't want him to get used to answering to any other name."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"Garret, can't you fix him up with an ear mike and talk to him while he's in there? Then he won't feel so alone."

"That's a good idea, Tabby. But he can't pick up the signal inside the bank. We thought of it."

"Okay. I was just thinking." She sat down next to him on the couch and snuggled up to him, leaning her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her, watching the clone type methodically. "Do you think he'll miss us?"

"Who?"

"Maxie, of course. They won't put him in jail, will they?"

They won't put him in jail, Garret thought, because he'll be dead by Friday. Surely Tabby understood that. Didn't she see how old he was? Aloud he said, "Oh, no, baby. They'll just hold him for questioning."

"Maybe they'll turn him over to Rand. Rand can take

him home with him. They'll be like brothers, sort of. Didn't you say Rand had a big house in Connecticut?"

"That's right," Garret got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He pulled her close and stroked her hair, and when she clung to him he could feel a tiny shiver. "A big farmhouse with a swimming pool and horses. Tabby, are you okay?"

"Horses," said Tabby dreamily. "He'll like horses." She put her face in his chest and started to cry.

Garret changed the plates on the Citroën limousine while the Duke put the bank's logos on the doors. He was dressed in a black chauffeur's uniform. "Drive him around a bit first," Garret said. "Get him good and lost before you take him to the bank."

"Right. Rand is eating lunch at *Mangez Moi*. Mako's boys will take him out if he leaves too soon."

"Once the clone's inside, get the hell out of there. There's nothing we can do. It goes down or it doesn't, but either way we're gone."

"Jesus Christ!" said the Duke suddenly. Garret turned around. He remembered the Duke hadn't seen the clone in a couple of days. It had come downstairs.

It was wearing the navy blue suit, with a red silk pocket square, Rand's trademark. A gold watch was fitted to its right wrist, and the hair was streaked with a light gray. Clear blue eyes smiled from lightly tanned skin, the result

of six hours with a sunlamp. The highly polished shoes were untied.

"I'm ready," it said.

"You look good," said Garret. He bent down to tie the clone's shoes. "Duke, you want to do his tie? Use a Shelby knot."

"Thank you, André." The clone used exactly the same voice that Rand used with his chauffeur.

"Goddamn," said the Duke. Garret smiled.

"Okay," he told the clone. "You're ready to go. Just do it exactly like you saw Rand do it on the TV. Just like we practiced. When you're done, just sit quietly and do what the guards tell you."

"Okay."

"Have you said good-bye to Tabby?"

"She's not here."

"What? What do you mean? Where is she?"

"She went away."

The Duke was looking at his watch, and tugging on the clone's arm. "Garret, we got to be going."

"Right. Okay." He led the clone out to the car and put him in the limo. The Duke got in the front seat. "Did Tabby say where she was going?"

The Duke started the engine. "Good-bye, Daddy," said the clone, and closed the door.

"Daddy?" said Garret. "Who taught you to say that?" The car took off. "Did Tabby teach you to say that?" he



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shouted after it. "Damn it." He went back up to the apartment. She wasn't there.

He sat in front of the bank of monitors, chewing on a pencil, on hand resting by the phone. It rang and he snapped it up. "Tabby?"

"Duke," said the Duke. "Okay, we're here." He was talking on the car phone. Garret could hear traffic noise. "Rand is at lunch. I'm going to circle the block and then let our boy off."

"Stay on the line," said Garret. He waited, looking at the screens. One monitor covered the front door, four others scanned the lobby. There were guards at the doors and escalators, relaxed but alert, watchful, carrying H & K automatic pistols. He saw the limo pull up, and the Duke leaped out and opened the door for the clone. The clone got out, its coat draped carelessly over his arm, just the way Garret had taught it. It nodded to the Duke, and the gesture was so much like Rand that only the Duke's presence told Garret he wasn't watching one of his own videos. The doorman opened the door and the clone walked confidently in. The walk was perfect.

"Garret, you there?" The Duke had an edge in his voice. "Yeah." He was watching the monitors, the clone crossing the lobby. "He's in."

"Mako's boys missed Rand."

"What!"

"He had a back-up car with bodyguards. They took out the Yakuza. He's on his way back and he's pissed."

"Duke, get out of there."

"On my way."

An escalator led to the second-floor trading pits. Two guards stood at the bottom of it. He watched the clone speak to the guards. Then he watched the guards step aside and let the clone up the stairs. Garret relaxed a little. There was still time. And then he saw something else.

He was on his feet at once, his face only inches from the monitor. The clone was riding the escalator, the guards standing at its base, and she was standing in the back. Half turned away from the camera, but there was no mistaking the curly blond hair, or the trim curve of her ass. She turned and looked up at the clone, a hesitant smile on her face, and Garret grabbed the phone. "Duke, Tabby's in the bank."

"The hell!"

"Go back and get her."

"Fuck that idea, man. I can't go in there."

"Damn it." He watched her watch the clone, then he flicked his eyes to the upper bank of cameras. The clone was on the mezzanine. Two guards unlocked the outer doors. Two more unlocked the inner doors. He checked the lobby again. Tabitha was standing by the escalator. The guards were looking at her curiously. He turned up the audio volume, but all he heard was an indistinct hum of voices.

He went back to the upper floor. The clone was in! It glanced once around the trading pit, without curiosity, and walked straight to Rand's console and sat down. It pulled the list of commands from its jacket pocket, studied it gravely, and began to type.

"Duke, tell Mako to stand by. He's setting it up."

"Mako's been standing by all morning, man."

Back on the ground floor Tabitha gave a longing look

up the escalator and started for the lobby door. Garret sighed with relief. "Come on, baby," he told her on the screen. "Keep walking. Time to come home." She passed out of the field of view of the escalator camera and reappeared near the door. "That's it, baby. A few more steps and you're safe."

Rand came through the door.

Garret could see the confusion on the faces of the door guards. Rand stalked in, scowling, shoulders hunched, a bloody napkin wrapped around his right fist. His bodyguards were right behind him, wary and hyper-tense, weapons drawn. The door guards exchanged hesitant glances, then followed them.

Switch to upper deck. The clone finished typing. Almost immediately the Duke spoke up. "Mako's moving in. Twelve seconds."

Lower level. Rand was talking with the guards by the escalator. Suddenly he sprinted up the moving stairs, three sets of armed men scrambling to keep up.

Upper level. Alarms beeping all over the room, Garret could tell. Some of the traders were tapping furiously at their keyboards, others were staring at them in bafflement, some were looking to the clone for instructions. The clone sat staring at its own computer, the screen filled with God-only-knew-what garbage Mako's worms were putting across it.

Outside the trading pit, guards unlocked the outer doors. Rand was screaming, and the whole mass of people disappeared from that screen and reappeared on the inner door screen. Furious garbled explanations, and the guards were trying to unlock the inner doors against the crush of men and guns. They succeeded finally, and Rand led the pack into the trading room, where they lined up facing the clone, weapons at the ready.

The clone swiveled in its chair, facing Rand, facing the camera, smiling, waiting, expectant. Garret knew that look. He had seen it many times before.

The clone was waiting for a cookie.

They shot it. Rand pointed his finger and snarled, and the guards opened fire, the sonic thuds of the automatics penetrating even the padded microphones, and the clone tumbled from the chair. Garret was glad he couldn't see its face. He was about to switch off the monitors when Tabitha came through.

She ran up at the sound of gunfire, the escalator and the doors now unguarded and open, her eyes wide and wild, her voice high-pitched, screaming, and hysterical. The guards, already primed to kill, nerves taut like bowstrings, swung their guns around before she even entered the room, squeezing the triggers reflexively, and the blasts cut her off in mid-cry. "Don't hurt him. Don't hurt him! He's only a babe... ." The bullets jerked her backward, slamming her body into the doors, and then Garret did cut off the monitors.

He stared vacantly at the dark screens, and when the phone rang he picked it up and said dully, "Yeah?"

"Garret? It's Duke, man. We're in! Mako says it was a total penetration. We did it! We're rich!"

"Okay," said Garret, and hung up the phone. His eyes were hot and itchy, and when he rubbed them, his fists came away wet. He wandered around the apartment looking for something of Tabitha's, something to take with him, and finally peeled the photo out of her passport and put it in his wallet. Then he went down to meet the limo. □

The Shoot

By Patricia Anthony
Art by Carol Heyer

He thinks he'll go crazy killing the Cambodian again, but as soon as he feels the weight of the borrowed .25 automatic in his pocket he's forgotten about losing his mind and he's back in the swing of things. His heart's going a mile a minute, faster than it had ever gone on meth, even faster than the foot-to-the-floor acceleration of good snow.

Here it is again, two in the morning of a cool Tuesday night, and he's jittery and sweating like a maniac. Roger always promised a hold-up would be like the best blow job he'd ever had, and Jerry's starting to wonder when the feel-good part starts.

The streets are moist and empty. No cars are juicing up at the gas pumps. No losers are standing around the pay phones trying to get dates.

Jerry hits the glass doors of the 7-Eleven with his shoulder, and when they don't open, he panics.

He fumbles around a moment before he realizes he needs to pull, not push. By the time he gets the doors open and enters the fluorescent glare of the store, he's sure the guy behind the counter has figured out what's happening. He'll have dialed 911 and'll be shouting "HOLD UP!" into the phone line. Listening on the other end will be a standing army of a thousand or so cops. Not just any cops, but Dallas cops with non-regulation .357s on their belts and murder in their eyes. They'll all pile into their squad cars and head on down to Columbia Avenue where the action is, where silly little Jerry with his limp dick borrowed .25 is holding up a 7-Eleven because Roger thinks it's a good idea.

Jerry peeks around the movie rental rack and over a stack of 12-pack Cokes. The guy behind the counter is smiling at him.

"Hello. Hello," the clerk says cheerfully. "How are you this evening?"

Jerry's tongue's Super-Glued to the roof of his mouth and there's no way to unstick it to answer. He just looks blankly at the clerk. The guy's small and skinny and dark. He has a smooth, innocent face and tiny stick wrists. His hands are toy-like. They're little kid's hands.

Jerry stares at a bag of Brach's mints, thinking that maybe he should just forget the whole damned thing, just buy that fucking bag of mints and get out. Only he doesn't have the dollar fifty-nine.

When Jerry doesn't respond, the clerk points towards the rack. "If you can't sleep, you should rent a movie. 'Fire in The Clouds.' All customers like 'Fire in The Clouds.' Space station goes ka-boom."

Ka-boom, Jerry's thinking nervously. Ka-boom.

"We got newest Crawler movie, too," the guy's saying. "Very scary." The guy laughs a clear high tenor laugh, a laugh like a bird's song.

Jerry finally pulls the gun from his pocket, and the guy stops laughing. His dark eyes get wide.

"Gimme the money," Jerry says, hoping the clerk doesn't notice the adolescent crack in his voice.

"Sure, sure." The guy's scared now. Jerry can feel fear coming off him like heat from a Dearborn heater.

"Come on!" Jerry snaps.

The guy's fooling around with the cash register like he's forgotten how it works and he can't get the damned thing open.

"Goddam it, come on!" Jerry shouts in a ka-boom voice, and all of a sudden time starts to slow down like a VCR that's inching forward from PAUSE.

The clerk drops his hand down, drops it down, oh god Jerry sees the hand go down, and he knows the guy's going for a gun, some big-ass over-and-under twelve-gauge.

There should be time because everything's going so slow. There should be time enough to reach over the counter to stop him. But it's like God's smiled over Jerry and said, "Hey, Jerry, you got a string hanging off you, man," and God pulls what you thought was just a loose thread and all of a sudden your whole sweater's coming apart.

Jerry's whole evening's unravelling at the seams — and all in slow-mo.

He watches the clerk's hand go down down down while his own hand comes up up up. For a few centuries or so Jerry figures he's not going to make it. The suspense is killing him, so to speak. And then all of a sudden, before he knows it, there's his arm out and the pistol pointed and the trigger pulled back and everything. All at once. Just like that.

Ka-boom.

The explosion from that wussy .25 sounds like the end of the world. The Cambodian's side is squirting blood, but a .25 isn't a Dallas Police .357, or a hidden under the counter shotgun. A .25 never stopped anything in its tracks. The Cambodian's got hold of something and he's bringing it up, anyway. Jerry shoots again, shattering a giant bottle of pickles. He fires a third time and hits the clerk, but it's too late. The hand's already free from the counter and Jerry knows that he's never going to make it to the door.

The Cambodian's fine-boned fist pops up over the counter.

There's a key ring in it.

Open-mouthed, the clerk shows him the key-ring and then kind of slides to the linoleum, leaving a smear of blood on the counter near the Cricket lighters and the tiny roll-up astrology charts.

It gets real quiet. Jerry can see the blue smoke from the gun hovering in a layer in the air like smoke through a late-night bar. The store smells of cordite and blood and dull pickles.

Jerry looks over the counter and sees that the Cambodian is lying in a pool of brine and gore trying his best to breathe. Not much is happening in his nose and mouth

but blood, though. The blood has little bubbles in it like the guy's a carbonated Cherry Coke somebody's shaken up.

Clunk. The little pea-shooter .25 drops right out of Jerry's numb fingers. His mouth is going a mile a minute, driven by a kind of agonized, nightmare helplessness. "Oh Jesus Oh Jesus Oh Jesus."

The clerk's chest is making a sound like someone drawing the last of a double thick shake through a straw. If only the guy would close his eyes, Jerry thinks. If only the guy would stop looking at him like that, like he's confused as to why Jerry shot him and he's terrified to die.

"I didn't mean it!" Jerry screams, forgetting about the Dallas Police, forgetting about the money, forgetting about anything but how the blood's running out of the holes he, himself, silly Jerry Walker, desperado extraordinaire, has made in this convenience store clerk.

He runs around the counter and kneels by the guy's side, trying to push the blood back in and hoping that he's not transfusing him with pickle juice. He supposes not. The guy looks kind of peaceful now. He's staring at Jerry like he's appreciative or maybe like all is forgiven.

"You're gonna be okay," Jerry's saying to him helpfully and Jerry starts to think that maybe the clerks' not as bad as he looks, that maybe they can sew him back up at Parkland. Then, just before he starts screaming for real, screaming so hard and so long that that's the way a cop darting in for a piss will find him, Jerry notices the guy's not breathing.

Jerry hates transitions. He hates their breath-snatching, bowel-wrenching abruptness. Blip, he's looking down at the dead Cambodian. Blip, he's back in the prison clinic staring up at the ceiling. His face is wet and he realizes he's been crying again.

The chin strap's holding him down so Jerry can't move his head. He slides his eyes right as far as he can and sees that Dunlap hasn't budged. He's sitting exactly the way Jerry saw him before the memory-mode transition ten minutes ago. The director's hunched over the monitor in his velour sweat suit with the intensity of a fat, turquoise culture regarding a dead cow.

It's a while before Jerry can find his voice. His eyes are rolled to the side so hard that they're beginning to ache. "We get a good take that time?" he asks.

"Um," Dunlap grunts. The director reaches out and fiddles with the controls on his ten-inch TV. In the screen Jerry can see himself. The candy-ass .25's coming out of his coat pocket.

Quickly, before the pain of that sight can smack him good, Jerry shuts his eyes. He shuts them very, very briefly. In that instant the image of the dead Cambodian has time to float up from the darkness.

He pops his eyes open. He's breathing hard; his voice sounds falsely high-pitched as though he's been sniffing helium.

"We through? I'm kind of tired today and everything. Please. Aren't they through?"

Dunlap turns around, his round, nerd face drawn up in a pensive expression. "Still getting some peripheral fuzziness."

Jerry, knowing what's coming, starts squirming against the straps as much as he's able and starts talking fast. "I think I need to be checked out by a doctor or

something, you know? I mean, I need to be looked at and stuff. Because I keep dreaming about the Cambodian, you know? Is that normal?"

Dunlap's bending over the bed repositioning the needles in Jerry's scalp. His movements are gentle and his hands smell of soap, like a dentist's.

"I don't want to do this no more."

"Please don't move," Dunlap says.

"I mean, is that what happens to people in your documentaries?" Jerry asks. "I used to dream about the murder sometimes but now it's every night. When I'm awake I think I catch glimpses of the Cambodian in the mess hall. At night before I go to sleep I can hear him laughing at the end of the cell block. I'm goddamned losing my mind."

Dunlap, big-deal director, winner of an Academy Award for Best Documentary, three-time winner at Cannes, doesn't bother to answer. Jerry'd hate him if only Dunlap weren't so hard to hate. Dunlap's a geek. He's vanilla ice cream. Hating Dunlap is as useful as hating Cream of Wheat.

"Please. Can I go back to my cell now?"

The probe needles are so thin and Dunlap's so gentle that the repositioning doesn't really hurt, but Jerry's crying, anyway. A drop of blood trickles through his hair, down his temple, and into his ear.

Suddenly Dunlap steps back and glances at the monitor, and his index finger plunges towards the keyboard.

Jerry tries to scream but no sound comes out. IT HURTS TOO MUCH TO GO THROUGH THIS AGAIN, he decides, but somehow he's in the 7-Eleven, the .25 in his sweaty hand and the Cambodian guy's staring at him.

This time I won't kill him, Jerry thinks; but of course he does.

This time it'll be different. But of course it's not.

Dunlap's playing with your head," Freddie D. says. They're in the cell, a couple of hours before lights out, and Freddie D.'s getting some reading time in.

"The shrink thinks after five years I should have come to grips with this shit. He thinks the filming's going to help me face what I did, you know? But Dunlap's shitting killing me, FD," Jerry says, staring at the cracks in the concrete ceiling. "I can't take it no more. I wish I'd never volunteered. He's doing weird stuff to my brain, FD. I can feel it."

"Um," FD hums. There is a snap and a flutter as a magazine page is turned. "Neural pathways, my man. That's where it's all at. I read all about Dunlap in *Time* and *Discover*. He shoot you up with all them neurotransmitters and then he fire electrical impulses to where he think them juicy memories are. Dunlap's widening your neural pathways so he can get a good, clear shot of your Murder 1. You being sacrificed for art."

Jerry is lying down on the top bunk, exhausted by a day of filmmaking. His feet are crossed at the ankles and he's tapping his right toe against the grimy, green wall. It's a great and joyous freedom to move his body.

After a moment he rolls his head over and looks at Freddie D. The former embezzler, his shirt open to expose the black diamond shape of his body-builder's pecs, is reading his *Scientific American* and eating one of Jerry's Snickers bars.

It's a no-no for Jerry to profit from his crime, so Dunlap



doesn't pay him cash. Instead, he beats off Jerry's brain and then hands him a bag of candy to use in trade around the prison; the reverse arrangement from that old men use to lure little girls into cars.

"Most memories, they like footpaths through the jungle, man," FD says, licking the chocolate from his fingers. "But for stuff that gets up next to you and shit, the real traumatic stuff, them footpaths get wider. I figure what you got between you walking in that motherfucking 7-Eleven and the time the police slap them bracelets on you is laid down with an eight-lane superhighway of guilt."

At the end of the shadowy block of cells, Jerry hears a high, tenor laugh. A birdsong sort of laugh. It makes his scalp crawl so bad that the places Dunlap inserted the needles sting. "I been dreaming about the Cambodian every night now."

"Yeah?" Freddie D. puts the *Scientific American* down and picks up *Newsweek*. "No surprise. You send a thought out, what direction is it going to go? Up the path of least resistance, right up that eight-lane superhighway you got built."

Down the row Beaudreaux and Weidmeyer start their weekly battle of the cassette players. Beaudreaux's playing 2 Live Crew and grunting like a rutting buffalo in time with the music. Weidmeyer's got his shit-kicker stuff cranked up high.

FD gets up from his chair and walks to the bars. "SHUT UP! I'M READING!" His huge voice batters the raw concrete, resounds in the steel.

The music stops and for an instant the building is so silent that Jerry thinks he has gone deaf. It is breathlessly silent, as silent as the 7-Eleven after that third shot.

Then a clang — someone drops something on the concrete floor. A man gives a low, bass laugh, and the spell is broken. The background chatter of the cell block picks up where it left off. FD walks back to his chair and sits down.

"I dream I go walking into the 7-Eleven, you know?" Jerry tells the ceiling miserably. "Only this time before I shoot the guy, I reach out and get the keys, and there's this one key on the ring that's old and all rusted up. When I look down on the ground where this Cambodian's bleeding, I see that his chest has a built-in strong box."

Jerry glances over at FD. His cellmate has put the *Newsweek* across his lap and his gaze is intent and absorbed. "So what happens then?"

"And so inside this strong box are rows and rows of what I think are baseballs. Only I take one out and —"

DON'T THINK OF THAT, Jerry tells himself. The act of thinking and describing what he recalls seems exhausting somehow, as though the memory is an eighty-pound sack on his back.

Suddenly Jerry, who quit smoking over three years ago, wishes he had a cigarette. He wants a cigarette so hard his hands have started to shake. If he weren't slightly incarcerated he'd get in his car and go get a pack. He wants a smoke so bad he'd even go inside a 7-Eleven to buy some.

"FD?" Jerry whispers. "What would happen if you just keep remembering that traumatic shit over and over and the pathway thing in your brain got bigger and bigger? What would happen then?"

"I don't know, man. What Dunlap's doing to you is scary. It ain't natural. Anyway. Don't leave me sitting

here with my dick in my hand. My arm's getting tired. What'd you take out of the Cambodian's strong box?"

The air leaves Jerry's chest in a long sobbing sigh, a sigh that makes him feel empty and very, very ashamed.

DON'T REMEMBER THAT, he tells himself, but he can't help it. He recalls the end of his dream as clearly as if Dunlap had shot one of those electrical impulses into his brain and it's speeding down that eight-lane memory superhighway.

"Skulls. Oh, Christ, FD. He had hundreds and hundreds of skulls in his chest."

That night Jerry dreams he is in the back room of the 7-Eleven. In a little clearing amid the boxes of cereal, the cartons of Coke, the Cambodian is having tea.

The Cambodian glances up and Jerry gets lost in the jungle of darkness behind his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Jerry says.

Then the Cambodian shrugs and picks up the white, skull-shaped tea pot, his movements so slow, so graceful, that his whole damned body looks like a dance. "We choose our own paths."

Paths.

Sun sparkles off the gravel at the side of the road, making Jerry squint. A big wind pushes off the desert, blowing ghostly patterns of sand across the empty highway. Beside Jerry the Cambodian walks, head down as though in thought.

"Why aren't there any people here?" Jerry asks.

The Cambodian laughs with a sound like a bird. "I killed them all," he says.

The next morning at breakfast Jerry thinks he sees the Cambodian sitting down at the end of the table, and so when the guards come to get him to take him in to see Dunlap, he sort of goes ape shit.

The guards aren't bad guys, but it's pretty clear they want to get the job over and done with, so they drag him, kicking and screaming, down to the infirmary.

"You volunteered for this," Leo's telling him as he's muscling him towards the clinic door. "The prison shrink says it'll be good for you."

Jerry's crying and snatching at Leo's blue uniform shirt. "Listen to me. I feel like Dunlap's woke up something in my brain, man. Like they woke up a monster in there or something. You got to get me to a doctor, Leo. Okay? Get me the prison counselor. Promise me you'll get somebody to help."

Looking properly sympathetic, Leo drags Jerry into the clinic and then helps the other guard strap him down.

When Jerry's all cozy and belted in, Dunlap comes to the side of the bed and starts the IV.

"He thinks something's wrong," Leo tells Dunlap. "Should we have a doctor examine him?"

Dunlap looks up with a near-sighted, geek expression and says simply, "No."

Leo hangs around for a split second to make sure Jerry's going to be okay. Then he turns on his heel and walks off.

Jerry's trying his best to tell Dunlap not to put him under, that he's going crazy, that any more remembering is going to make that Cambodian and the 7-Eleven so big it's going to push everything else out of his mind.

But he can't get the words in order. They're stumbling

out of his mouth, tumbling over each other like kittens playing chase across the floor. Then Jerry sees the syringe plunge into the IV tube and the fireworks start going off in his brain and he feels Dunlap sliding needles into his scalp.

"Please don't," Jerry's saying. His appeals have come down to basics. "Please."

Dunlap, child genius director, winner of the fucking Academy Award, is back at the keyboard and the monitor, programming the instructions and acting like *no habla* the language of desperation.

"Please," Jerry says as his nails dig into the mattress. And then he's back in the 7-Eleven.

The Cambodian is seated at a table in a clearing he's made for himself among the boxes of cereal, the cartons of Cokes. Jerry glances around the dim room. The back of the 7-Eleven smells of ground coffee and sugar and the spicy tea the Cambodian is drinking.

"It wasn't like this," Jerry says.

The Cambodian seems to have the patience of a slow-growing tree. Movements deliberate, he picks up the tea pot and pours a tiny, thimble-sized cup just for Jerry.

What Jerry has worried about has happened. He's finally gone round the bend. He's lost a couple of cards out of his deck. His elevator doesn't go to the top floor any more.

"It never happened this way," he says.

"Neural pathways," the Cambodian says. "That is where it is at. Please sit down. Have some tea."

But Jerry doesn't want to sit. Jerry wants to get back to where things, even if they weren't very happy, made some sense. "Dunlap's going to see this and he's going to wake me up, right?" he asks hopefully. "He's going to see this and know something's wrong."

The Cambodian tips his head to the side and regards the tea pot. "Dunlap will see what he expects to see. He will film what he expects to film. Dunlap has no imagination. To him, the shortest distance between synapses will always be a straight line."

Jerry walks around the room, searching for the way out, thinking that if he could just get back to the main part of the store he could catch Dunlap's attention. Maybe Dunlap will come and help him or something.

"There is no door," the Cambodian tells him.

And after a while Jerry discovers the guy's right.

"Please sit."

There's not much else to do, so Jerry sits down and sips his tea. The tea's strong and hot and sweet.

"This never happened," Jerry tells him. "When the electricity hits my brain, I'm supposed to remember real stuff."

The Cambodian nods agreeably. "Yes, indeed. What is reality? Neurons fire an electro-chemical burst and subjective time is frozen. A river, when it floods, builds new banks. Time is more like water than fire." He opens his chest to expose the neat rows of skulls. "Choose one," he says, as if he is offering Jerry a cookie to go with his beverage.

Not wanting to be impolite — Jerry figures murdering the guy has been uncouth enough — he takes a skull.

With the empty eye sockets staring balefully at him, Jerry naturally starts thinking of death. He starts remembering how the Cambodian seeped foamy blood onto the bone-colored linoleum.

Then a funny thing happens. He realizes with a shock that the memory is just plain boring, like a bad movie he's seen once too many times.

"Hey, man," Jerry says as gently as possible. "Look, I'm sorry for everything, but enough's enough, okay?" Jerry *does* feel sorry. He is sincerely sorry. Has been remorseful now for so long that his apology-transmitters have started building calluses. And suddenly the spark's just not there. Yeah, he's still sorry for killing the Cambodian, but he's getting fucking tired of wallowing in it.

"When I was ten years old," the Cambodian tells him, "the government put a gun in my hand and made me a soldier against capitalism. I was a very brave soldier and I shot many capitalists: elementary school teachers who did not know how to harvest rice; surgeons who did not clean latrines well. When I was ten years old I planted many fields with dead capitalists."

Jerry turns the skull over in his hands. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about," Jerry says. There is something in the back of the skull that looks like a small eye-socket. He runs his finger around the edges and after a moment realizes what he is fondling is a bullet hole.

"I became tired of apologizing, too."

Jerking his head up, Jerry stares across the plain board table to the Cambodian. The guy's childlike hands are spread on the wood.

"Paths," the Cambodian says sadly.

Like gray fingers on a dun table, the eight-lane highway divides and spreads across the desert. Jerry blinks his eyes against the glare. He hears the click-click of the Cambodian's shoes on the gravel and smells the dusty, metallic odor of noon.

"It is time to choose your path," the Cambodian says.

So that's what happens when the highway gets too big, Jerry thinks. Nature abhors unwieldy things, so when memory gets too big, it just sort of breaks up and goes in different directions. In his hands the skull feels pleasant: cool and smooth.

Jerry glances at the eight different choices before him. "Well, I guess it's time to get back, huh? Which one takes me to Dunlap?"

The Cambodian stares at him with those wise, dark eyes and says, "Returning to Dunlap is your fate, so any one of the roads will take you."

"Thanks," Jerry says, sticking his hand out. "Hey. It was nice meeting you." The pleasantries his Mom taught him don't seem so fussy or hollow as they did when he was a kid. In fact, that Tuesday night in the 7-Eleven has always seemed incomplete because it lacked the usual have-a-nice-days, the good-to-see-yous, and the y'all-come-back-nows.

The Cambodian's hand in his is dainty; the handshake is as firm and righteous as destiny. "It was a pleasure meeting you, too," he says.

Jerry turns to study the choice of paths again. When he turns back the Cambodian, of course, is gone.

The middle road looks like a comfortable choice for Jerry. Except for trying to knock over the 7-Eleven, he's always been a man of middle-ground, of moderation.

As he hikes down the sun-hammered asphalt to the place where Dunlap waits, Jerry unlocks his chest and puts the skull on its shelf where it belongs. □

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